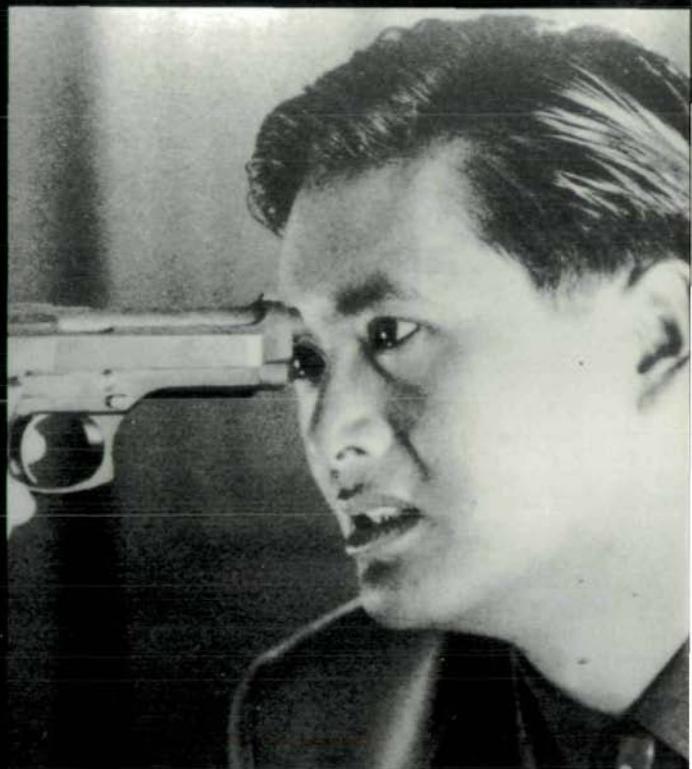


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Chow Yun-Fat in *The Killer* (John Woo, 1989). Picture courtesy Jerry Ohlinger's Movie Material Store

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# Hong Kong popular culture as an interpretive arena: the Huang Feihong film series

HECTOR RODRIGUEZ

Although the real Huang Feihong (1847–1924) was a celebrated street performer, physician and martial arts instructor in the Fifth Regiment of the Guangdong Army and the local civilian militia, reliable information about his life remains scarce. Fictional accounts of his martial skill and unflinching moral rectitude have nonetheless been frequently serialized in newspapers and popular films. In the winter of 1949, director Hu Peng completed *Huang Feihong Zhan: Bianfeng Mie Zhu/The True Story of Huang Feihong: Whiplash Snuffs the Candle Flame*, the first of a series of films produced throughout the 1950s and 1960s that mostly revolved around the hero's later years, after he had taken over his father's pharmacy and martial arts academy, the Baozhilin. The films therefore depict Huang Feihong as a living legend whose fame and ability are widely recognized and respected throughout the city of Guangzhou.

Although films and television shows about Master Huang have continued to be made, this essay principally focuses on the films of the 1950s, often directed by Hu Peng, scripted by Wang Feng and starring Kwan Tak-hing.<sup>1</sup> To borrow an expression from cultural historian Prasenjit Duara, I describe the series as an 'interpretive arena'. The films provided a forum whereby their historical protagonists gradually accrued a complex network of more or less heterogeneous uses and interpretations, some congenial to the interests of state authorities or community elites, others indifferent, ambivalent

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, I have transcribed Chinese names, phrases, and film titles in accordance with the standard *pinyin* romanization system. Unfortunately, this system is based on the Mandarin pronunciation of Chinese characters rather than the Cantonese dialect widely used in Hong Kong, but since most English-language sources tend to employ the *pinyin*, I have reluctantly followed suit. In some instances, however, I have retained Cantonese spellings when these are in common use; thus I refer to Kwan Tak-hing rather than Guan Dexing, and to the Tung Wah, rather than Dong Hua, Hospital.

- 2 Prasenjit Duara, 'Superscribing symbols: the myth of Guandi, Chinese god of war', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 4 (1988), pp. 779–80.

or even opposed to those powers.<sup>2</sup> Huang Feihong sustained manifold interests, experiences and moral outlooks. He was at once a dazzling martial artist and lion dancer, a proud exemplar of both China's national traditions and Guangdong's provincial culture, a friend of local merchants and government officials, a paternalistic protector of the underdog against corrupt landlords and criminals, a conservative champion of Confucian morality and a progressive fighter against feudal superstitions.

Huang's evolution as a cinematic hero was rooted in the convictions and preferences of the groups and individuals producing and consuming the films, as well as in the institutional context and historical circumstances of their creation and dissemination. The films stood at the intersection of at least three factors: the requirements of a commercial motion picture industry largely sustained by overseas capital, the cultural customs of Cantonese emigrants seeking to reaffirm their ethnic identity, and the filmmakers' self-proclaimed goal of promoting patriotism, social responsibility and a sense of ethnic identity. The Huang Feihong films were at once commodities, collective sites of popular assembly and vehicles of civic education. But even the goals of this civic agenda were by no means simple or unitary, including instead a complicated repertoire of moral and political ideals (Confucian, populist, and progressive). This essay reconstructs the rich tissue of concerns embodied in the film series, as well as the cultural, political and economic factors that undergird this interpretive arena.

- 3 Li Cheuk-to, 'A director speaks: Li Tie on opera films', in Li Cheuk-to (ed.), *Cantonese Opera Film Retrospective* (Hong Kong: The Urban Council, 1987), p. 70.
- 4 Hu Peng, *Wo yu Huang Feihong: Wushihuien Dianying Daoyan Shengye Huiyi Lu/Huang Feihong and I: Memoirs of a Film Director's Fifty-year Career* (Hong Kong, 1995), p. 17.



Kwan Tak-hing, leading actor of the Huang Feihong series.  
Picture courtesy: The Hong Kong Film Archive.

It is illuminating to begin by examining the economic circumstances that have partly shaped the practice of filmmaking in Hong Kong. There is a very close connection between, on the one hand, the production and distribution context of the Huang Feihong series and, on the other, some of the key formal characteristics of individual films. The films' target audience not only consisted of local Hong Kong residents but also, and perhaps more importantly, of the Cantonese Diaspora that had settled in the various Chinatowns of South East Asia. Capital for film production in Hong Kong was often raised abroad, from pre-sales to Chinese exhibitors in, say, Singapore or Malaysia, who retained a very high degree of control over the actual production of the films.<sup>3</sup> Yong Yao, the company which financed the first Huang Feihong instalment, had been formed by Wen Boling, a Chinese exhibitor in Singapore who retained final control over casting. He agreed to give Cao Dahua the key role of Liang Kuan, Huang Feihong's best-known disciple, because of the actor's popularity throughout South East Asia. It was the same commercial reasoning that prompted the choice of Li Lan, the first Miss Hong Kong, for the female lead.<sup>4</sup> These economic pressures functioned as powerful constraints on the filmmakers, who could only inject political

or social elements into the series so long as they would not interfere with the bottom-line goal of accumulating profit.

A salient feature of the Huang Feihong films and the Hong Kong industry throughout the 1950s was, therefore, the intimate relationship between production and exhibition. The main goal of South East Asian exhibitors was to secure a regular supply of inexpensive films to fill their screens, thus fostering a prolific output.<sup>5</sup> The commercial success of the first Huang Feihong film generated a feverish pace of production that brought out twenty-five films in 1956 alone (approximately twelve per cent of that year's total Hong Kong cinema output), financed by various relatively small film companies who vigorously competed against each other to secure contracts with the main stars.<sup>6</sup> Release dates roughly convey the speed of production: the first Huang Feihong installment completed in 1956, *Huang Feihong Letai Bi Wu/Huang Feihong at a Boxing Match* (Hu Peng, 1956), was released on 6 January, followed by *Huang Feihong Da Nao Foshan/Huang Feihong's Fight at Foshan* (Hu Peng, 1956) on 14 January, and then by *Huang Feihong Huo Shao Dashatou/How Huang Feihong Set Fire to Dai-Sha-Tou* (Hu Peng, 1956) only two weeks later. This output was considerably reduced the following year, when a mere eight instalments were released, all directed by the prolific Hu Peng and scripted by Wang Feng.

Commercial imperatives encouraged filmmakers to employ the conventions of the Chinese mass culture market that had found a home in Hong Kong and Taiwan after the Communist victory in the mainland. The plots for the series were either invented for the screen or borrowed from popular novels, folk stories and current sensational articles, rather than adapted from actual historical documents. Some situations even incorporated narrative norms and situations from popular Hollywood films, especially the Saloon fight characteristic of countless Westerns, transplanted in various Huang Feihong instalments to the more indigenous setting of a dim sum restaurant. The filmmakers generally mobilized a broad range of popular narrative strategies that included visual slapstick, manichean character types, grotesque and hyperbolic villains, simple moral lessons, secret trapdoors in mysterious buildings, and spectacular climactic fights. Exhibitors generally expected a fairly standardized product based on tried-and-true formulae. Casting was, again, a typical example of this drive towards standardization. A handful of performers dominated the series, playing the same roles, or at least the same kinds of roles: Kwan Tak-hing was invariably Huang Feihong, and Cao Dahua played his main disciple Liang Kuan, while Shi Jian was always the boisterous villain. The series mobilized a narrow storehouse of types and situations that made for a fairly predictable narration. The basic narrative structure, about which more will be said below, usually featured a petty gangster, malicious martial arts instructor, lascivious merchant or corrupt government official who confronted Huang

5 C. Jarvie, *Window on Hong Kong: a Sociological Study of the Hong Kong Film Industry and its Audience* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1977), pp. 129, 21.

6 Data based on *ibid.*, p. 129 and Lau Shing-hon (ed.), *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film* (Hong Kong: The Urban Council, 1980), pp. 232–3.

Feihong and/or his students for various reasons: he may abuse poor peasants, threaten the virtue of young women or directly challenge the protagonist to a duel. Although Master Huang would at first try to resolve matters by peaceful means, stoically bearing his antagonist's insults with a composed self-control, he would eventually be forced to fight his opponent. A minor clash roughly half way through the plot would be later followed by a spectacular climactic combat, often during a religious festival, street fair or lion dance.

Within this format there was, of course, some latitude for variation. Films like *Huang Feihong Heng Sao Xiaobeijiang/Huang Feihong's Victory at Xiaobeijiang* (Hu Peng, 1956) included extended subplots about love triangles or household intrigues, subordinating the martial arts component to the generic demands of the family melodrama. The contents of some stories were individually tailored for particular holidays: those designed for a Chinese New Year audience usually had a more festive and humorous tone. Filmmakers generally hoped to continue attracting audiences by introducing at least one highly publicized novel feature in each film. *Huang Feihong Dazhan Shuangmendi/Huang Feihong's Battle Under the Double Gate* (Hu Peng, 1956), for instance, contained a vampire plot, while *Huang Feihong Shuidi Sanqing Su Shulian/How Huang Feihong Thrice Captured Su Shulian in the Water* (Hu Peng, 1956) included underwater cinematography, and other films fetishistically displayed the bodies of women in traditional Chinese underwear. Some films incorporated rare folk customs, like Unicorn dancing, a practice characteristic of Hakka communities in Hong Kong's New Territories and elsewhere in the Chinese mainland. Thus, despite the push towards standardization, every story also tended to contain a marker of differentiation, an element that would set it apart from previous films in the series and from other Hong Kong films in the market. The promotion of such innovations within an otherwise standardized framework was, of course, an important competitive strategy. Some plots were, for instance, devised to showcase popular singers, comedians and media personalities, including such Cantonese opera celebrities as Zhou Feifei in *The True Story of Huang Feihong*, Ren Jianhui in *Huang Feihong Gusi Jiu Qingzhen/How Huang Feihong Saved the Lovelorn Monk from the Ancient Monastery* (Hu Peng, 1956), and Deng Biyun in *Huang Feihong San Dou Yan Zhi Ma/Huang Feihong's Three Battles with the Unruly Girl* (Hu Peng, 1957).

This close relationship between the film series and the Cantonese opera was, of course, partly determined by the nature of its intended audience. The Cantonese emigrants who supported this cinematic culture maintained native-place guilds and other locality-based associations in Hong Kong and throughout South East Asia. Guilds not only functioned as employment and welfare agencies, but also ran temples devoted to distinctive deities and organized festivals and opera performances, thus helping emigrants to maintain regional and

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Perry, *Shanghai on Strike: the Politics of Chinese Labor* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 19–21, 26–31.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Emily Honig, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919–1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 69–78.

<sup>10</sup> Yu Mo-Wan, 'The prodigious cinema of Huang Fei-Hong', in Lau (ed.), *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film*, p. 81.

subregional native-place bonds.<sup>7</sup> According to Elizabeth Perry, they 'afforded displaced workers a sense of belonging' that helped to reaffirm their Cantonese identity in the midst of a strange environment.<sup>8</sup> Locality-based collective solidarities were intimately linked to many routine everyday practices in that, for instance, workers often tended to gravitate to certain occupations characteristic of their native place and attended performances of operatic dramas in their native dialect.<sup>9</sup> The Huang Feihong films were contiguous with such practical affirmations of regional solidarity, reasserting a broad range of distinctly Cantonese cultural activities that furnished a source of community and interpersonal networks for a diasporic audience. It is worth remembering that throughout the 1950s, Chinese audiences in Hong Kong and South East Asia often gravitated towards films shown in their native dialects. There was, for instance, a Hong Kong-based Mandarin-dialect film industry which often appealed primarily to exiled Northerners, although for various reasons it managed to win over Cantonese speakers in the 1960s and early 1970s. But, throughout the period under discussion, film spectatorship was nonetheless largely stratified along dialect lines. The cinema therefore functioned as a public site where viewers could come together as members of a shared regional culture. In an excellent study of the series, Hong Kong historian Yu Mo-Wan has reminded us that the films 'strongly reflect the Cantonese culture and dialect of the majority of Hong Kong's population, and the traditions of the surrounding hinterland of Guangdong province'.<sup>10</sup> Set in the provincial capital of Guangzhou rather than Hong Kong, the films invoked a broad culture that extends beyond, and seldom explicitly refers to, places and activities specific to the British colony. Its ethos was, more broadly, regional, and it arose out of two interlocking factors: the commercial structure of a film industry partly sustained by pre-sales to overseas Cantonese exhibitors, and the regional bonds and practices of its intended audience.

<sup>11</sup> The martial artist Shi Jian, memorable for his villainous roles, was among the few native Hong Kong performers.

In addition to this reception context, the biographical backgrounds of the people who actually made the films also fostered the expression of a distinctly regional consciousness. The filmmakers had themselves emigrated to Hong Kong from other localities in the Guangdong region and, less frequently, from Northern China. Director Hu Peng had been born in Shanghai to a Cantonese family, while both actor Kwan Tak-hing and screenwriter Wang Feng were natives of Guangzhou, the regional capital.<sup>11</sup> These exiles made films that expressed an experience of belonging to a broadly regional context rather than to the city of Hong Kong. Characters often engaged in specifically coastal activities like fishing in *Huang Feihong Die Xue Longwu Miao/How Huang Feihong Saved the Dragon's Mother's Temple* (Hu Peng, 1956) or piracy in *Huang Feihong Xue Zhan Gu Po*

<sup>12</sup> Lau (ed.), *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film*, p. 81.

*Wu/How Huang Feihong Fought a Bloody Battle in the Bachelor Girls' Home* (Hu Peng, 1957), and the music sometimes included such Cantonese opera tunes and folk melodies as the familiar tune *Zhang junling/Under the General's Orders*, adding to the films' overall 'regional flavor'.<sup>12</sup> The influence of Cantonese opera was, of course, pervasive throughout the series, not only because the cast often had extensive stage training and experience but also because the first four installments were written by the well-known opera lyricist Wu Yixiao. He was later replaced as a writer by Wang Feng, who would himself direct several Huang Feihong episodes in the late 1960s before moving on to Shaw Brothers in 1975 to make films with a distinctly Cantonese setting. The series was therefore the product of a group of filmmakers with a distinct sensitivity for Southern Chinese culture. One of director Hu Peng's own early films had depicted the lives of Cantonese opera performers, *Xueyan Nichang/The Blood-Stained Costume* (1948), starring two actors who would later become a staple of the Huang Feihong films, Kwan Tak-hing and Shi Jian. The filmmakers' cultural identity was therefore rooted in the traditions of Guangdong and China rather than any sense of belonging to Hong Kong.

The production context of the series was of course underlain by the evolution of colonial Hong Kong as a city of immigrants and exiles, a development intensified by the influx of refugees, emigrants and industrialists from the Chinese mainland during the Japanese invasion and the 1949 Communist victory. Between May of 1949 and April of the following year, for instance, the local population nearly doubled from one million, six hundred thousand inhabitants to two million, six hundred thousand, many of whom were confined to government-built refugee camps.<sup>13</sup> Ethnic strife understandably became an important theme of such films as the so-called 'North-South' comedies, which

<sup>13</sup> Ng Ho, 'Exile: a story of love and hate', in Li Cheuk-to (ed.), *The China Factor in Hong Kong Cinema* (Hong Kong: The Urban Council, 1990), pp. 32-3.



**Huang Feihong Daps Majia Zhuang/Huang Feihong's Victory at Ma village**  
(Hu Peng, 1958).  
Picture courtesy: The Hong Kong Film Archive.

<sup>14</sup> An outstanding example is *A Happy Union of North and South* (Shou Shilu, 1964).

<sup>15</sup> Yu, *The Prodigious Cinema*, pp. 81–2.

<sup>16</sup> Hu, *Wo yu Huang Feihong*, pp. 39–40.

<sup>17</sup> Chang-tai Hung, *Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature, 1918–1937* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 30; W. L. Idema, *Chinese Vernacular Fiction: The Formative Period* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'What is literature?', in *What is Literature? and Other Essays*, trans. Steven Ungar (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 88.

revolved around the humorous misunderstandings between Mandarin-speaking northerners and Cantonese-speaking southerners in melting-pot Hong Kong.<sup>14</sup> The Huang Feihong series sometimes selectively borrowed the conventions of this genre by including northern martial artists, often played by the Beijing-born actor Yuan Xiaotian, unable to communicate with the people of Southern China. The films showed a heightened consciousness of ethnic difference. Yu Mo-Wan has aptly described them as an ongoing archive of Cantonese popular culture.<sup>15</sup> The expressions 'archive' and 'collection', which I am here using interchangeably, denote any gathering of items selected and arranged to demonstrate their ongoing value and to preserve them for posterity. The film screenings were partly organized as occasions for the dissemination of cultural knowledge. For instance, viewers who saw *Guandong Shi Fu Tao Long Ji/How the Ten Heroes of Guangdong Slew the Dragon* (Hu Peng, 1950), a film about Huang Feihong's father and other famous Cantonese heroes of the late Qing dynasty, could exchange their ticket stubs for a free pamphlet describing a medicinal recipe for fighting injuries. The pamphlet included a rhyme to help readers memorize the complicated list of ingredients.<sup>16</sup>

This intensely regional flavour partook of an artistic movement that also pervaded modern Chinese literature, painting and music. Many intellectuals and artists struggled to preserve and collect folk art. Founded in Beijing in 1920, the Folksong Research Society (*Geyao yanjiuju*), for example, strove to record the cultural practices of peasants and other subordinate social groups rather than the elite culture (*guizu wenhua*) produced and consumed by officials and scholars. The society's stated aim was to illuminate 'the voice of the folk' and 'the true feelings of the people'.<sup>17</sup> Of course, there are some forerunners of this modern movement in late imperial China, the most familiar of which remains Ming scholar and playwright Feng Menglong (1574–?), who published a meticulous collection of Suzhou folksongs, the *Shange* (Mountain Songs), as well as three volumes of vernacular stories, the *San Yan*. But this drive to collect folk culture, which was supposed to furnish a direct expression of the common people's genuine aspirations and experiences, was intensified after the founding of the 1911 Republic of China. The historical situation was characterized by an intense discovery of 'the folk' as an object of artistic representation and celebration. Jean-Paul Sartre has aptly described this kind of predicament:

the writer questions himself about his mission only in ages when it is not clearly defined and when he must invest or reinvent it, that is, when he notices beyond the *elite* who read him, an amorphous mass of possible readers whom he may or may not choose to win, and when he must himself decide, in the event that he has the opportunity to reach them, what his relations with them are to be.<sup>18</sup>

The Huang Feihong series provided a site where filmmakers came together to define their relationship with the idea of the common folk. Underlying this cultural agenda was a conception of the cinema as a vehicle of historical documentation. Films should record those precious folk traditions that might not survive China's rapid transition to modernity. The filmmakers' self-imposed mission was to protect the traditional sources of Cantonese cultural identity from the ravages of time and circumstance.

This conception of folk culture as eminently fragile or evanescent, and thus in need of active preservation, underpinned the archival mission of many Hong Kong films of the 1950s: Cantonese opera librettist Tang Disheng, who worked for Hu Peng as actor and screenwriter in the anti-Japanese war drama *Dadi Shenzhong/The Earth's Clockwork* (1940), had reportedly turned to filmmaking in order to ensure the survival and dissemination of distinctly local dramatic forms.<sup>19</sup> Director Hu Peng himself noted that the Huang Feihong films preserved 'precious information about the martial arts traditions of the Guangdong region'.<sup>20</sup> In order to fulfil this agenda, he enlisted the assistance of popular novelist and martial artist Zhu Yucai, the author of many Zhuang Feihong books, who collaborated on several early screenplays. Zhu had been trained by Lin Shirong, one of Huang Feihong's disciples. His novel *Lingnan Qi Xia Zhuan/The Extraordinary Martial Hero of Lingnan* was putatively based on

<sup>19</sup> Li, *A Director Speaks*, pp. 72–3.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 39–40.

*Huang Feihong Xipeng Fu Fa/  
How Huang Feihong Defeated  
the Tiger on the Opera Stage*  
(Hu Peng, 1959).

Picture courtesy: The Hong Kong Film Archive



oral accounts of Master Huang's life. The films on which Zhu collaborated partook of an important feature of popular martial arts novels, which often included detailed descriptions of complicated fighting techniques, not only to delight the reader with dazzling feats and wondrous adventures but sometimes also to furnish a storehouse of cultural knowledge about Southern martial arts and folk culture. The filmmakers sometimes displayed a pedagogic attitude towards their audience, constructing sequences in order to ensure or reaffirm

the viewers' acquaintance with a wide range of local popular customs. In *The True Story of Huang Feihong*, for instance, the protagonist offers his new disciple Liang Kuan an extended explanation about the moral philosophy of martial arts and the influence of older masters on his own fighting style, evoking an experience of cultural continuity and respect for long-established traditions. Throughout the extended Lady Golden Flower Festival sequences in *Huang Feihong Shiwang Zheng Ba/Huang Feihong's King Lion Wins the Championship* (Hu Peng, 1957), various participants describe to one another the rules and customs that undergird the celebration, clearly in order to enhance the audience's familiarity with the folk activities and cultural values of Guangzhou province. And in *Dragon's Mother's Temple*, the custodian of a temple explains to its visitors, and of course also the film's viewers, the symbolic or legendary meaning of the various objects in the building's main chamber.

In keeping with this archival intent, the series aspired to faithfully preserve and disseminate a range of putatively authentic martial arts postures and movements. An important component of the films was therefore the assistance of skilled martial artists trained in both Southern and Northern fighting styles, such as former Opera instructor Yuan Xiaotian, who appeared in several films directed by Wang Feng during the late 1960s, as well as Shi Jian, a disciple of martial artists Sun Yufeng and Zhao Guilin, familiar with Northern-style schools like the Eagle Claw, Mantis, Luohan, Chaoyuan and Northern Shaolin.<sup>21</sup> Huang Feihong's actual wife and son supplied additional martial arts information and story ideas, while some of his disciples acted in the films and served as fighting instructors. The stories would often grind to a halt so that a particular fighting stance could be demonstrated: in *The True Story of Huang Feihong* a visitor to the protagonist's academy is introduced to a disciple who obligingly displays his virtuoso techniques, thus subordinating the forward thrust of the ongoing plot to a moment of pure spectacle. An important aspect of the series was its peculiar relationship to narrative, the ways in which ongoing lines of action were routinely suspended in dazzling vignettes that displayed various aspects of Cantonese folk culture. The formal organization of the plot was therefore determined by the goal of producing popular pleasures akin to those of many folk festivities, particularly China's traditional street festivals, which often allowed martial artists, singers, acrobats, dancers and other entertainers to publicly demonstrate their ability.<sup>22</sup>

Hu Peng discarded his own initial choice for the role of Huang Feihong, the established Cantonese film star Wu Chufan, because of his lack of extensive martial arts training. Hu's final choice was of course Kwan Tak-hing, already an accomplished fighter, Cantonese opera performer and lion dancer before the beginning of his long film career in the early 1930s. The director recalls being asked whether Kwan Tak-hing's skill was genuine: although actual evidence on

<sup>21</sup> Yu, *The Prodigious Cinema*, p. 82.

<sup>22</sup> Madeleine Anita Slovenz, 'The year is a wild animal: lion dancing in Chinatown', *The Drama Review*, vol. 31, no. 3 (1987), p. 88.

<sup>23</sup> Hu, *Wo yu Huang Feihong*, pp. 23–5.

audience response remains scant, it is plausible to assume that viewers often took an active interest in the authenticity of the performance.<sup>23</sup> And it is in any case certain that filmmakers strove to project an aura of authenticity by interweaving fictional and nonfictional dimensions, simultaneously depicting both fictional stories and the actual skill of the leading performers. But Hu Peng was nonetheless occasionally willing to rely on montage and trick effects to create spectacular feats that the actors had not actually carried out. His emphasis on documentary authenticity sometimes (but only sometimes) became a mythmaking strategy designed to surround Kwan Tak-hing and his co-stars with an overblown appearance of wondrous skill. This idealization of the leading actor was partly rooted in economic concerns, in so far as his martial artistry helped to sell the films to Cantonese audiences throughout Hong Kong and South East Asia. Hu Peng's documentary rhetoric not only fulfilled the aspirations of a group of filmmakers intent on preserving regional culture but also enhanced the market value of the series. The same cinematic strategies therefore fulfilled two distinct purposes: the manufacture of successful filmic commodities and the formation of an ongoing archive of Cantonese popular culture.

This archive was not, however, simply a neutral mirror of a pre-given set of folk customs. The filmmakers selected, reconstructed and arranged their materials in ways that actively produced a particular conception of the ‘people’, their duties and their entitlements. The films were pedagogic texts whereby a group of film directors, playwrights and novelists worked to disseminate a certain picture of folk traditions in coastal China. They were paradigms of a way of seeing popular culture. Throughout this essay, I will employ the term ‘culture’ in an extended sense to designate everyday practices and beliefs in addition to rituals, music and literature. Popular culture, then, includes various forms of quotidian conversation and interaction – turns of phrase, fables, tongue twisters, ways of eating and drinking, forms of dress and etiquette – as well as religious festivals and opera performances that are not exclusively produced for, or enjoyed by, a dominant elite, whether it comprises capitalists, landowners, government officials, academic experts or Confucian scholars.<sup>24</sup>

This broad definition of the popular to my mind captures a key formal strategy of the Huang Feihong series. The films depicted a wide range of everyday patterns of conversation and interaction, including jokes, proverbs, riddles, nicknames, customs, moral rules and values, and collective celebrations, thus erecting an ongoing fictional world whose texture and density rests on the accumulation of inter- and extra-textual references to practices and concerns clearly marked as popular. These practices constitute a constant background

<sup>24</sup> My definition of popular culture loosely follows that of Raymond Williams. See Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, ‘An interview with Raymond Williams’, in Tania Modleski (ed.), *Studies in Entertainment* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 4–7.

<sup>25</sup> Durkheim's observation about religious practices is applicable to these broader popular activities: that they are not simply systems of signs whereby a purely interior experience of commitment is outwardly communicated; rather, they are themselves the forms wherein that commitment is periodically created and reaffirmed. It is the exterior forms of communal membership, the texture of characteristic patterns of human conduct, that the films invoke and celebrate. I am using the term 'experience' to denote precisely these external forms of more or less ritualized conduct. See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: The Free Press, 1915), p. 464.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 285.

for the narrative action and define the main traits of the protagonists and their foes. Characters would typically frequent teahouses and dim-sum restaurants, keep pet birds, organize cricket tournaments, play with firecrackers, express folk religious beliefs, or struggle for domination in popular activities. In *Huang Feihong Danao Hua Den/Huang Feihong and the Lantern Festival Disturbance* (Hu Peng, 1956), the members of a secret society unsuccessfully try to wrest control of the organization of a popular festival from a prominent merchant. The customs and goals of the cinematic characters therefore largely derive from, or connect to, broader contexts of popular activities (including Dragon Boat Races, Lantern Festivals, and street fairs) that mark them as members of a larger Cantonese community.<sup>25</sup> By showing individual characters as members of a broader social fabric, a whole way of popular life, the stories depict the common people, their everyday beliefs and activities and concerns, as intrinsically valuable objects of aesthetic representation and archival preservation.

The Huang Feihong series expressed an attitude which may, in Charles Taylor's felicitous expression, be described as an 'affirmation of ordinary life'.<sup>26</sup> This attitude regards the everyday activities and ritual practices of humble people as significant in their own right. The films embodied a way of seeing popular culture – its cordiality, vivacity, and honesty – with an attitude of warmly sympathetic concern, inviting viewers to carefully and admiringly attend to the fabric of ordinary life. In both *The Lantern Festival Disturbance* and *King Lion Wins the Championship*, director Hu Peng deployed tracking camera movements and long shots to lovingly detail the texture of teahouses, street fairs and religious festivities, revelling in the busy comings and goings, the nervous gestures and quiet strolls, the moments of popular participation and communal interaction. These shots foregrounded certain locales and activities as an everyday context of readily recognizable communal practices, as distinctly popular occasions of general participation in shared activities and symbols. They projected an image of the folk as an anonymous background whose members would occasionally provide information for the viewer, comment on the action, react to the words and deeds of the protagonists, and endow the mise-en-scene with its characteristically dense texture. The films were actively engaged in defining the domain of the popular, its characteristics and its value, by presenting an idealized picture of ordinary life in the Guangdong region.

Filmmakers would occasionally enhance this impression of ordinariness by inserting footage of actual celebrations in contemporary Hong Kong, thereby incorporating nonfictional elements into an otherwise fictional plot. In *Huang Feihong Tianhou Miao Jing Xiang/Huang Feihong Attends the Joss-stick Festival at Heavenly Goddess Temple* (Hu Peng, 1956), for instance, the protagonist, his

disciples, and their foes walk into a real festival devoted to the Heavenly Goddess Tin Hau (known in Mandarin as Tianhou or Mazu), a divinity often worshipped by fishing communities along the coast of the South China Sea. Such sequences would characteristically last longer than necessary to further narrative lines of action or to provide information about characters. Our interest in the progression of the imaginary plot would be temporarily displaced by an interest in the shifting, vivid textures of these popular practices. What is affirmed is their 'heat and noise' (*renao*), a widely used expression that denotes the presence of large crowds, the constant movement of persons, the succession of rituals and operas, and the intoxicating display of heterogeneous sights and sounds characteristic of religious festivals, village fairs and other collective celebrations.<sup>27</sup>

27 Robert P. Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), p. 64. See also Weller, *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China: Taiping Rebels, Taiwanese Ghosts and Tianamen* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), p. 169.

28 This is probably the most frequently stressed aspect of the Huang Feihong films. See: Sek Kei, 'The development of "martial arts" in Hong Kong Cinema', in Lau, *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film*, pp. 28–9; Yu, *The Prodigious Cinema*, p. 82.

What is particularly striking about this celebration of ordinary life is of course the claim to realism or verisimilitude embodied in the films. To be sure, the presence throughout the series of exaggerated or manichean characters, melodramatic situations and crudely painted backdrops may appear to violate certain codes of realistic verisimilitude. But it is worth remembering that realism is a historical concept that frequently arises and develops in contrast to, or even revolt against, previous artistic norms. The claim to realism embodied in a work of narrative fiction has to be examined in relation to the aesthetic practices and traditions against which its authors are reacting. More specifically, the Huang Feihong films express a realist aspiration by departing from certain strands of the Hong Kong action cinema, particularly the use of supernatural plot devices and Beijing opera styles of performance.<sup>28</sup> Having noted that most swordplay films of the 1940s and 1950s borrowed the stylized conventions of Northern theatre, Hu Peng dismissed them as 'fake' and tedious, calling instead for a cinema that would refuse to depict ghosts or fairies, minimize



*Huang Feihong Leitai Dou Wu/Huang Feihong's Battle with the Bullies in the Boxing Ring* (Hu Peng, 1958).  
Picture courtesy: The Hong Kong Film Archive.

<sup>29</sup> Hu, *Wo yu Huang Feihong*, p. 6.

the presence of artificial or theatrical gestures and use actual fighting techniques.<sup>29</sup> Only those theatrical elements were preserved that would not interfere with this all-pervasive reality-effect; opera songs, for instance, tended to be realistically motivated as performances within the diegesis. The well-advertised presence of genuine martial artists and lion dancers, as well as the aura of authenticity evoked by the lovingly detailed vignettes of popular festivals and street fairs, also enhanced the series' realist agenda. While I do not argue that the Huang Feihong films always and everywhere partook of a realist impulse, it is important to realize that certain aspects of the series were designed in deliberate opposition to the putative artificiality of dominant Hong Kong cinema strategies.

This realist strand was partly underlain by the historical experience of Chinese modernity and its ambivalent confrontation with western film and literature. As is well known, China's modernization was rooted in a situation of colonial or, at best, semi-colonial exploitation, institutionalized through a series of unequal treaties that gave European and North American powers extraterritorial rights in several Chinese regions, but particularly in the major port cities. It was precisely the encounter with foreign culture in one of China's most cosmopolitan cities that shaped director Hu Peng's approach to filmmaking. It was in Shanghai that he had grown to see the cinema of his nation in relation to the institutions and experiences of modernity. Throughout the early 1930s, he had been employed in one of Shanghai's movie palaces, the Beijing Theatre, as a projection worker in charge of the subtitles (which were actually slides projected below the screen). Although he was eventually promoted to assistant manager of the theatre's advertising department, he remained a humble figure within the overall structure of China's film industry until a former employer, the radio engineer Kuang Zhang, founded the Kwok Ka film studio in Hong Kong's Causeway Bay and financed Hu's directorial debut, *Yesong Hanyi/Sending Clothes in the Cold Winter Evening* (Hu Peng, 1938).<sup>30</sup> Like many other filmmakers who emigrated from the cosmopolitan Shanghai film industry to its expanding Hong Kong counterpart, Hu Peng brought with him a patriotic commitment to the fate of modern China, and a keen awareness of the need to absorb selective strands of western culture. As he has noted in his recent autobiography, he had sampled a wide range of both local and imported films at the Beijing Theatre, an experience which firmly persuaded him of the relative backwardness of his own national cinema: 'local films were not comparable to foreign ones; there was a huge gap in every respect'.<sup>31</sup> The superiority of US and European films was for him rooted in their skilful blend of realistic details, rounded characters and powerful moral themes. Hu's disparagement of Chinese cinema recalls the feelings of inferiority and inadequacy that sometimes plague the citizens of other peripheral nations faced with the powerful presence of aggressive imperial states.

<sup>30</sup> Yu, *Xianggang Dianying Bashidian/Nian/Eighty Years of Hong Kong Cinema* (Hong Kong: Regional Council, 1994), p. 79.

<sup>31</sup> Hu, *Wo yu Huang Feihong*, p. 55.

In this context, he considered realism to be a fundamental criterion of the superiority of western film culture over its Chinese counterpart. The historical problem which confronted Hu Peng can be reconstructed as follows: how to improve the quality of local films in line with certain realist standards without renouncing all that was distinctive and valuable, all that was a compelling source of cultural and national identity, in the Cantonese tradition. The filmmaker wanted to restore a sense of pride in local culture by depicting regional customs and stories with the same conscientious realism that distinguished the best foreign productions. His film series was to be a synthesis of traditional culture, or at least a selective version of it, with the demands of cultural modernization.

The Huang Feihong films were thus partly a response to the peripheral predicament of modern China in an international arena. In keeping an archive of popular culture, the aim was to recreate and demonstrate the vitality of the ‘common people’ and their culture in order to assert the symbolic sources of a renewed national identity and an intense patriotic sentiment. The cinematic recreation of a regional popular culture was therefore not antithetical to the assertion of a patriotic Chinese consciousness. The richness and diversity of China’s regional cultures can in fact sustain a sense of pride in, and solidarity with, the national heritage.<sup>32</sup> The first film of the series was, after all, released only four years after the Japanese invasion of China, an event which deeply marked the entire generation. Actor Kwan Tak-hing had toured South China throughout World War II in order to entertain the troops. Because of his wartime activities, which included a journey to the USA to raise money for China’s war effort, he had become known by the nickname ‘Patriotic Entertainer’ (*aiguo yiren*), defining his screen persona around a patriotic ethos.<sup>33</sup> Hu Peng has noted that he chose Kwan as a star partly because of this nationalistic aura.<sup>34</sup> A similar opposition to Japan’s presence in China marked the cinematic representation of, for instance, a villainous samurai in a late addition of the series, *Huang Feihong Shen Wei Fu San Sha/Huang Feihong: The Conqueror of the ‘Sam-Hong’ Gang* (Wang Feng, 1969).

Although such Japanese enemies were largely absent from other films, the series often displayed a moderate sympathy towards the central government, qualified by a certain suspicion of corrupt officials. In *Huang Feihong Xin Shi Hui Qiluan/How Huang Feihong Pitted a Lion Against the Unicorn* (Hu Peng, 1956) the protagonist struggles against Elder White Brow, the head of a secret society mobilized to overthrow the Qing authorities. And, in *Dragon’s Mother’s Temple*, Wong cooperates with a Qing government official to train extra-governmental, civilian militia (*mintuan*). The series, in sum, arose from two very different sources: a regional consciousness rooted in the distinctive culture of Guangdong, and a patriotic sentiment

<sup>32</sup> For a succinct discussion of the intricate relationship between national identity and cultural solidarity, see John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 68–78.

<sup>33</sup> Lau, *A Study of the Hong Kong Martial Arts Film*, p. 175.

<sup>34</sup> Hu, *Wo yu Huang Feihong*, p. 91.

directed to the fate of China and inspired by the more nationalistic circles of Shanghai's cosmopolitan film industry.

It is relevant in this context that Huang Feihong should be a practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine, the principles of which he briefly discusses with his patients and disciples in various films. The contrast between Chinese and western science was particularly central to everyday life in Hong Kong because the local population sometimes displayed a marked aversion to such foreign practices as surgical operations, preferring instead indigenous forms of medical treatment.<sup>35</sup> More crucially, medicine had come to play a key role in the struggle over cultural and national identity in modern China. While Lu Xun and many other twentieth-century progressives had denounced Chinese medical remedies as feudal, unscientific and deeply harmful to the people, cultural conservatives like the Nationalist Party (*Guomindang*) member Zhang Bingling regarded traditional science as a fundamental, ineradicable component of the national identity.<sup>36</sup> The expression 'national medicine' (*guoyi*) had become an important component of the cultural conservatives' vocabulary by the late 1920s, enshrined in such official institutions as the Shanghai Academy of National Medicine, of which Zhang was Honorary President. Huang Feihong exemplified the value of China's traditional culture, embodied in the national medicine. Despite Hu Peng's selective incorporation of realist norms associated with progressive literature, the series upheld a conservative version of the national identity.

To borrow an expression from Hong Kong historian Tsai Jung-fang, I would describe the films as 'Confucian cultural nationalist' texts that regarded the dissemination and preservation of Confucian morality as a foundation for the cultural unification and political stability of China.<sup>37</sup> The aim of the Huang Feihong series was not only to rejuvenate Chinese cinema by combining a heightened realism with a renewed respect for national traditions, but also to disseminate messages that would enhance the moral stature of cinema audiences along Confucian lines. The films simultaneously presupposed and reassured such familiar standards of personal virtue and mutual obligation as filial piety (*xiao*), humanness (*ren*), sincerity (*xin*), and reciprocity (*bao*). In a Confucian context, the source of these virtues is human feeling (*renqing*), which denotes the capacity to experience intense concern, affection and gratitude towards others. The concept of *renqing* establishes a connection between morality and affect. Hierarchical relations between father and son, elder brother and younger brother, or ruler and subject, as well as egalitarian bonds between friends, are in this view underlain by emotional bonds that give the point to those social distinctions. An important task of moral cultivation is self-containment (*keji*), the capacity to incorporate a concern for the interests of others into the motivational structure of one's conduct.<sup>38</sup> The aim is to acquire the capacity to pursue one's

<sup>35</sup> Jung-Fang Tsai, *Hong Kong in Chinese History: Community and Social Unrest in the British Colony, 1842–1913* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 66.

<sup>36</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the relationship between national identity and science, see Ralph Crozier, *Traditional Medicine in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), especially pp. 59–69, 81–104. This section of my essay has drawn considerable ideas and information from Crozier's illuminating work.



Xingxingwang Dazhen Huang Feihong/Huang Feihong's  
Battle with the Gorilla  
(Hu Peng, 1960).  
Picture courtesy: The Hong Kong Film Archive.

<sup>37</sup> Tsai, *Hong Kong in Chinese History*, p. 150.

<sup>38</sup> David Hall and Roger Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 122.

<sup>39</sup> Ambrose Yeo-chi King, 'Kuan-hsi and network building: a sociological interpretation', in Tu Wei-ming (ed.), *The Living Tree: the Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 119–20.

goals without clashing with the goals of others, and to do so out of sincere human concern.<sup>39</sup>

The films are pedagogic texts designed to furnish viewers with exemplary models of Confucian moral conduct. An exemplary model is anyone whose virtuous behaviour encourages corresponding virtues in others. The moral use of fiction here depends, first of all, on the choice of virtuous protagonists and, secondly, on the construction of narrative situations that provide those protagonists with abundant opportunities to display their virtue. The Huang Feihong series closely adheres to this moralistic understanding of narrative. Its protagonist is characteristically introduced while explaining Chinese medical practices and traditional ethical principles to his students and friends, or fulfilling ritual obligations that bring out his ethical cultivation, respect for cultural traditions and pedagogic vocation. He often donates money to the poor, charges low fees for his medical services, worships his ancestors, respects the elderly, explicitly reaffirms his commitment to the values of 'peace and harmony', endures verbal insult and bodily harm without losing his composed self-restraint, and insistently conveys his ethical ideals in the form of maxims and rules that frame every narrative situation in terms of a lesson to be learnt.

Master Huang's character traits are designed to mark him as an exemplar of civic conduct who seeks out conciliatory rather than violent solutions to social conflicts.<sup>40</sup> He is, moreover, an ideal paternal figure almost entirely lacking in sexual desire: although married and with children, he never seems to display visible sexual desires even towards his wife. She seems barely a part of her husband's life, at times greeting him at the door only to promptly vanish into the depths of her invisible domestic space. Huang embodies a patriarchal moral order that is seldom disturbed from within. In *The True Story of Huang Feihong*, the filmmakers do confront their hero with a sexual threat, a woman whose frankly provocative behaviour openly challenges his sense of restraint, but he merely reacts with embarrassment, even fear, pacing nervously and finally fleeing the room. This scene is one of those rare moments in which the protagonist seems to lose his bearings, but the tension is resolved when he simply agrees to accept the woman as his own adopted daughter(!), thus assimilating an unruly desire into a patriarchal domestic order. This sequence perhaps shows Huang Feihong's veneer of paternalistic benevolence and Confucian self-control to be a psychic defence against the obvious anxiety evoked by feminine sexuality. But, throughout the series, the protagonist otherwise consistently retains a spontaneous desire to do what is right. His ethical stature is readily and widely recognized by his students and friends as an example to be followed. Whenever the academy's students fail to live up to their master's moral ideals, they themselves openly acknowledge their own shortcomings to one another, bringing out the intrinsic connection between morality and

<sup>40</sup> I owe this definition of civility to William Rowe, 'The problem of "civil society" in late imperial China', *Modern China*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1993), pp. 151–2.

<sup>41</sup> See David Hall and Roger Ames, *Anticipating China: Thinking Through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Cultures* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 183–4.

<sup>42</sup> In an influential formulation, Mencius emphasized the intrinsic link between shame and ethical self-cultivation: 'If a man is not ashamed of being inferior to other men, how will he ever become their equal?', *Mencius*, trans. D. C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 183.

<sup>43</sup> I have loosely borrowed the concept of typage from Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form*, trans. Jay Leyda (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949), pp. 8–9, 127.

shame in the Confucian tradition. To acquire a sense of shame (*qi*) here means to regard one's actions and attitudes as morally deficient in relation to one or more exemplary teachers or historical models.<sup>41</sup> The concept of shame indicates the internalization of a public attitude towards the self.<sup>42</sup>

In this moral framework, what is required is an orientation towards the public good over and above any purely personal desires or goals. To pursue what is personally advantageous is to potentially bring about competition and struggle. Extreme self-interest (*li*) tends to diminish social 'harmony' (*he*) and bring about 'chaos' (*luan*), an outlook once again echoed by the Huang Feihong series. The presence of blustering, petulant villains with a penchant for such disreputable activities as gambling, extorting the poor, molesting women, plotting against the State and picking fights in restaurants and teahouses, invariably exemplified the chaos brought about by the egotistical pursuit of unrestrained self-interest. These villains were furthermore played by stock actors like Shi Jian, Liu Jialiang, and later Yuan Xiaotian, whose unusual facial features, loud laughter, arrogant attitudes and exaggerated grimaces immediately expressed a boorish and boisterous character markedly lacking in ethical cultivation. An important element of the Huang Feihong films was therefore their reliance on typage, the use of performers whose facial features and outward behaviour immediately and unequivocally conveyed their moral stature and social station.<sup>43</sup> These boldly delineated, manichean characters render the threat of social disorder vividly and quickly recognizable.

The protagonist's main goal throughout the series was not, however, to punish those who create chaos but to reform their moral attitudes. In such films as *How Huang Feihong Pitted a Lion Against the Unicorn*, Master Huang would bring criminals to see the ethical impropriety of their aspirations and to willingly harmonize their interests with the demands of social order. To be sure, the villains who do fail to acknowledge their moral obligations are invariably sent to local magistrates for prompt sentencing and imprisonment, after a requisite climactic fight with Huang Feihong himself. But violent punishment was never more than a strategy of last resort in a film series that systematically affirmed the priority of moral cultivation over legal coercion. The protagonist's primary aim was not to force citizens to do what is right, but to bring them to desire it in a spontaneous way. Social harmony invariably depended on Huang Feihong's capacity to thus educate those around him through the sheer exemplary force of his upright behaviour. By illustrating the power of virtue, the plots reaffirmed Confucian conceptions of harmony, civility and self-containment that marked the protagonist as a civic-minded guardian of the Chinese nation's moral stature and an instrument of social reform.

An important, though frequently overlooked, feature of the films was their heightened consciousness of class and status differences. Their Confucian traditionalism was as a cultural framework mobilized to define the ‘proper’ relationships between commoners and elites. Recent historical scholarship on late imperial and early modern China defines the term ‘elite’ in broad terms, an approach which corresponds to the general social outlook of the Huang Feihong series. Elites in this view comprise those persons who command social authority in local, regional and national contexts on the basis of a range of heterogeneous sources, including official degrees and civil service appointments, private control over land or troops, lineage networks, commercial relationships and/or putative religious powers.<sup>44</sup> Community elites therefore exercised local authority by many different means, depending sometimes on the traditions and practices of particular localities and constituencies, as well as on changing historical circumstances.<sup>45</sup> Members of Chinese elites traditionally brokered daily transactions, helped to settle minor disputes, mediated between commoners’ demands and governmental institutions, subsidized infrastructure projects (irrigation works, roads, dykes, bridges) and religious festivals, managed schools and academies, donated money to local temples, organized popular militia and established other kinds of charity and welfare activities. In this kind of social arrangement, government officials delegated control over everyday popular affairs to, or worked jointly with, autonomous or semi-autonomous professional associations (*fatuān*) like chambers of commerce, lawyers’ guilds, bankers’ groups, local armies and other societies. These elite activities comprise what may be called managerial public spheres. I am here following Mary Backus Rankin’s important historical research on Zhejiang province during the late Qing, as well as that of William T. Rowe on Hankow, which principally focus on the extra-bureaucratic management of general community affairs by various powerholders in rural communities, urban neighbourhoods and other local contexts.<sup>46</sup> Elite activism in Hong Kong included the sponsorship of the Tungwah Hospital and Confucius festivals by merchants and industrial capitalists. The Huang Feihong films explicitly addressed themselves to the moral underpinnings of these diverse elite activities. They fictionally depicted and upheld a local micro-politics of reputation embedded in nongovernmental associations like the protagonist’s own pharmacy, in the business and friendship ties between Huang and prominent merchants (*The Lantern Festival Disturbance*), in the charity acts performed throughout *Huang Feihong Diexue Maanshan/Huang Feihong and the Battle of Saddle Hill* (Hu Peng, 1957), in the elite neighbourhood associations (*kaifōng*) that would often coordinate and subsidize public festivals (*King Lion Wins the Championship*), and in the formation of *mintuan* (people’s militia) managed by

<sup>44</sup> Tsai, *Hong Kong in Chinese History*, pp. 87–9. For a related description, see also Lynda S. Bell, ‘From comprador to county magnate: bourgeois practice in the Wuxi silk industry’, in Joseph W. Esherick and Mary Backus Rankin (eds), *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 113–39.

<sup>45</sup> Mary Backus Rankin, ‘Some observations on a Chinese public sphere’, *Modern China*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1993), p. 160.

<sup>46</sup> See, for instance, Mary Backus Rankin, *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 15–6; William Rowe, *Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City* and *Hankow: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

local notables. The plots would almost invariably highlight, and often celebrate, elite intervention in everyday life.

There is an important sense in which the films can be described as the embodiment of an elite attitude towards popular culture. The stories depicted folk festivities (dragon dances, street fairs, religious holidays) in intensely ambivalent terms, not only as a network of shared traditions binding the community together, but also as potential sources of social disintegration populated by pirates and petty criminals, whose illegal or subversive activities would frequently erupt in calculated acts of maliciously disruptive violence. The films would often warn that popular culture may degenerate into chaotic conflict unless carefully monitored by the strict, benevolent and paternalistic protagonist. This mistrust of the popular recalls the occasional complaints directed against the periodic festivals and celebrations of small market towns and villages by imperial officials, large landowning families and merchants throughout late imperial China. Popular events were often denounced for encouraging intense feelings of pleasurable self-abandonment that would induce the uneducated common folk to transgress moral propriety, releasing dangerous collective energies that would constantly threaten to evade and undermine social obligations and patterns of institutionalized authority.<sup>47</sup> By offering an intoxicating succession of heterogeneous spectacles, popular indulgence in collective festivities putatively challenged the harmonious Confucian vision of self-containment, frugality and temperance. Operas and festivals were said to distract persons from proper activities, like the pursuit of career, the care of the family and the production of agricultural goods, leading to a waste of energy in frivolous pursuits that undermined the cult of labour and productivity required from the general population. Community elites and government officials often described popular celebrations as a potential threat to social order and traditional morality. To contain this danger, local notables and bureaucrats frequently campaigned to educate grass-roots communities in Confucian moral concepts, rules and attitudes. This aim was executed through a cluster of interlocking strategies that included the founding of local academies and schools, the erection of memorials for virtuous officials and commoners, the organization of public lectures, the establishment of rewards for diligent students, the publication of popular manuals of moral instruction, the standardization of an examination system based on the Confucian classics, the rewriting of well-known novels, and the promotion of particular operas presumably conducive to the stabilization of social authority.<sup>48</sup> In line with this conservative outlook, Huang Feihong often asserted the value of productive work over wastefulness while allowing some room for popular enjoyment under his own watchful guidance. The master would intervene in folk festivals by taking control of potentially subversive activities like dragon dancing, bringing these centrifugal pleasures under elite

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, William Dolby, *A History of Chinese Drama* (London: Paul Elek), p. 69.

<sup>48</sup> Arthur C. Wright (ed.), *The Confucian Persuasion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960), pp. 8–9.

management. The films struggled to render grass-root public enjoyment compatible with the moral imperatives of social order. This aim is consistent with the Hong Kong government's education policy, which promoted Confucian values and, more generally, an apolitical public culture.

It would nonetheless be a serious distortion to simply describe the films as top-down instruments for the dissemination of a dominant elite culture. The Confucian tradition often defined elite power as a public display of virtue, in accordance with normative standards that emphasize the moral leadership and public accountability of government officials. State authority was in this paradigm bound by the same patterns of reciprocal obligation as other everyday hierarchies, such as those between parent and child or teacher and disciple. Political power was in other words an extension of long-established moral norms that pervaded quotidian interactions throughout the society.<sup>49</sup>

This activist strand of Confucian culture has often been vigorously reaffirmed by popular literature and drama in Hong Kong and throughout late imperial and modern China. Many stories and operas upheld reciprocal moral duties between ruling and subordinate groups, expressing an intense moral outrage against corrupt or abusive landlords and men of letters. Oral stories, vernacular novels and operas frequently asserted a range of moral concerns, a sense of what is appropriate and just, or unfair and outrageous, that not only defined normative standards of public accountability for high officials and local powerholders, but also justified popular rebellions born of righteous indignation.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps the most familiar example remains *The Water Margin*, a vernacular novel depicting a band of righteous outlaws during the Northern Song dynasty, which exerted a considerable influence on the formation of secret societies throughout Qing China. The rebels followed moral codes independent of normal institutions like the family, the village, the guild and the legal system, thus inverting orthodox assumptions about the social sources of morality.<sup>51</sup> As Robert Ruhlmann has aptly noted, 'the novel [assumes] that the society of the outlaws is more authentically Confucian than orthodox society'.<sup>52</sup> In a different context, Joseph Esherick has also highlighted the connection between popular culture and political protest. According to his vivid account of the Boxer uprising, the rebels drew their political inspiration from such forms of popular culture as folk religion, shamanistic possession, mythological narratives, vernacular novels, oral stories, and operas about knight-errants.<sup>53</sup>

The Huang Feihong series drew on this critical vernacular tradition to illustrate the reciprocal moral obligations constitutive of social authority. In *Dragon's Mother's Temple*, for instance, the protagonist

<sup>49</sup> Anthropologist Mayfair Mei-hui Yang has noted that this strand of Confucian philosophy envisions 'a society in which power is contained in the reproduction and conduct of social relations and not objectified and externalized in a universal state opposed to society'. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: the Art of Social Relationships in China* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 229.

<sup>50</sup> David Strand, 'Mediation, representation, and repression: local elites in 1920s Beijing', in Esherick and Rankin (eds.), *Chinese Local Elites*, p. 328.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. E. Perry Link, Jr, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1981), p. 38.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Ruhlmann, 'Traditional heroes in Chinese popular fiction', in Wright (ed.), *The Confucian Persuasion*, pp. 169–70.

<sup>53</sup> Joseph W. Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 59–67.

explains to a Qing official that to govern an empire means to ‘win everyone’s heart’ by being benevolent, impartial and fair, thus underscoring the responsibility of government officials to behave as ethical exemplars for the common people, in line with the responsibilities of their social position. Huang Feihong himself sometimes uses his martial skills to defend government officials and merchants against secret societies and pirates, but on other occasions protects peasants and fishermen from abuses by incompetent officials and wealthy elites, as in *Huang Feihong Longzhou Duo Jin/Huang Feihong Wins the Dragon Boat Race* (Hu Peng, 1956). He even becomes an outlaw in *Victory at Xiaobeijian*, where a corrupt official forces him to flee his residence in Guangzhou and take refuge in a rural shelter.

Throughout the series, Huang Feihong and his disciples would sometimes justify their actions on behalf of the poor or the disenfranchised by invoking the value of humanity (*rendao*). Their actions are underlain by a sense of the absolute value of humankind. The plot of *The Battle of Saddle Hill*, for instance, depicts a particularly brutal custom, the stoning of thieves and other petty criminals by an entire mountain village under the guidance and encouragement of a local landlord’s corrupt son. Horrified by this practice, Huang Feihong’s leading disciple, Liang Kuan, tells a gathering of local peasants that moral respect for basic humanity (*rendao*), including compassion for the plight of the poor, is more important than any rigid adherence to established norms of conduct. In thus suggesting that moral sentiments take precedence over arbitrary social conventions, the filmmakers are clearly struggling to accommodate certain progressive, even left-wing, strands of Chinese cinema. This progressive tradition is best exemplified by the Cantonese filmmaker Cai Chusheng, who worked in the Shanghai and Hong Kong film industries throughout the 1930s and 1940s before his appointment as Chairman of the Chinese Film Workers’ Association in the People’s Republic of China. Having frequently denounced the poor artistic quality and escapist content of contemporary Chinese films, Cai demanded a cinema that would aid in the struggle against feudal superstition, economic exploitation, patriarchal abuse and foreign imperialism. In contrast to cynically commercial products, films ought to retain a seriousness of purpose, realistically diagnosing contemporary social problems while proposing concrete solutions in order to encourage a widespread cultural and economic transformation.<sup>54</sup> While working in Shanghai’s Beijing Theatre, Hu Peng already admired Cai’s meticulous perfectionism, his commitment to realist aesthetics and social change, and his intense patriotism. Inspired by Cai Chusheng’s acclaimed *Yu Guang Qu/Song of the Fishermen* (1934), Hu had made a film about the oppression of poor fishermen and their families by a ruthless landlord, *Fenghuo Yucuan/Fishing Village at War* (1948), starring Kwan Tak-hing, Shi Jian and

<sup>54</sup> Tan Chunfa, ‘The influx of Shanghai filmmakers into Hong Kong and Hong Kong cinema’, in Law Kar (ed.), *Cinema of Two Cities: Hong Kong Shanghai* (Hong Kong: The Urban Council, 1994), pp. 76–7.

Bai Yan, a popular actress in Shanghai and Hong Kong. This sort of progressive populism also found its way into the Huang Feihong films, shaping their love of popular culture and their denunciation of feudal customs (such as the stoning of thieves). The protagonist therefore incorporated both a progressive commitment to popular enfranchisement and a traditionalist vision of benevolent elite paternalism.

The Huang Feihong series embodied a complex moral picture that not only upheld the Confucian values promoted by Hong Kong's ruling elites but also – and in sharp contrast to the apolitical culture forged by the colonial government – affirmed the public accountability of political power. The Huang Feihong films highlighted the normative expectations and duties binding elites and common people together around a shared social ethic, thus projecting a sense of moral community which recognized the common people as political agents capable of raising and defending legitimate claims in public arenas. In this context, it is important to see that the cultural authority of Hong Kong's Chinese and British elites contained an intrinsic tension between, on the one hand, an interest in depoliticizing public life by excluding administrative decisions from grass-root contestation and, on the other, an active promotion of Confucian norms and values which sanctioned popular activism and emphasized the moral accountability of rulers. This tension has been enhanced by the visible presence of Communist Party and Guomindang activists in the colony, whose overtly political activities have been grudgingly tolerated by the colonial authorities within certain narrow limits. These modern activists strove to mobilize the general population around political mass movements rather than encouraging their passive submission to a colonial system of technocratic administration. One of the main proponents of mass mobilization was Cai Chusheng, whose call for a progressive and patriotic cinema had a certain influence on the Huang Feihong series. But it is also noteworthy that various strikes and protests throughout Hong Kong's recent history do testify to the existence of an active political culture in the colony. Hong Kong was not a thoroughly depoliticized society: not only because disgruntled members of the financial elites have themselves sometimes supported anti-colonial or patriotic mass movements, or because of active Communist and Guomindang agitation, but also because sectors of the general population have often mobilized their collective efforts for political and economic ends. Consider, for instance, the 1925–6 General Strike against the British government following the May Thirtieth Incident in Shanghai, and the well-known 1966 riots provoked by the Star Ferry Company's decision to increase the fare by five cents.<sup>55</sup>

By upholding normative standards of elite responsibility, the Huang Feihong films have also helped to nourish the moral frameworks that give the point to such activist attitudes. This richly textured cinema

<sup>55</sup> John D. Young, 'The building years: maintaining a China-Hong Kong-Britain equilibrium 1950–71', in Ming K. Chan (ed.), *Precarious Balance: Hong Kong Between China and Britain, 1842–1992* (Armonk and London: M. E. Sharpe, 1994), p. 135; Aline K. Wong, *The Kaifong Associations and the Society of Hong Kong* (Taipei: The Orient Cultural Service, 1972), p. 198. In juxtaposing these heterogeneous examples of social activism, I do not of course want to deny the differences between them. My aim is to illustrate some of the manifold patterns of activist protest in conflict with the dominant goal of depoliticizing public life.

expressed attitudes of respect and love towards humble everyday lives, marking ordinary popular culture as a source of intense enjoyment, communal bonds, and normative values for disenfranchised social groups. The films were clearly receptive to the modern political emphasis on mass mobilization. But rather than struggling to overthrow elite power *tout court*, Master Huang would characteristically strive only to correct the violation of a specific moral norm by punishing a corrupt martial arts instructor, landlord or government official. As depicted in the films, social problems were caused by the actions of morally corrupt individuals; they were in no way to be seen as systematic products of the institutional structure of elite power. The Huang Feihong series therefore circumscribed the boundaries of righteous popular protest and legitimated traditional patterns of elite authority. But there are nonetheless instances where the organization of narrative material did not incorporate its more progressive elements into a traditionalist framework. In *The Lantern Festival Disturbance* a young woman not only disobeys her father's prohibition against learning martial arts by studying with a left-handed woman bandit, but also dons a masculine disguise in order to freely participate in a street fair. She repeatedly rebels against a familial and social structure that imposes roles and duties against her will, and even conceals her rebellious activities from Huang Feihong himself, who of course functions as a symbolic father figure. Instead of passively accepting the will of her biological father or relying on the assistance of the paternalistic hero, she takes justice into her own hands and demands her right to self-determination. What is particularly striking is the extent to which the film never denounces her insubordination; rather, the casting of well-known martial artist and actress Ren Yan helps to draw sympathy towards the character's righteous resistance. At the same time, however, the film sympathetically shows a young couple's desperate efforts to bear a male heir for their family, thus celebrating patrilinear arrangements and traditional versions of feminine domesticity. The plot combines both progressive and traditionalist concerns without struggling to reconcile them. In general, the communication of a systematic body of contents was not always and everywhere a consistent goal of the filmmakers.

The Huang Feihong series was therefore an interpretive arena which incorporated and negotiated different moral and political frameworks available in the larger society. It is often difficult to separate one strand from another. Instead of seeing the films as systematic expressions of a coherent set of values and attitudes, it is therefore best to think of them as a multi-layered assemblage of overlapping and criss-crossing concerns that may, but need not, neatly fit together: a capitalist emphasis on producing profitable films that would seduce audiences with spectacular dances and fights, formulaic stories and recognizable stars; a search for cultural identity through the collection

and display of Cantonese regional traditions; a nationalist expression of love for China's Confucian culture; a realist celebration of popular culture and ordinary life; a conservative adherence to the values of law and order; a moral humanism that defines the norms and values governing relations between elites and commoners; and a progressive interest in the enfranchisement of peasants, women and the urban poor. This cultural collage is rooted in the social and cultural conditions of postwar Hong Kong, where a paternalistic practice of colonial government restricted to civil servants, capitalists, community notables and other putative experts uneasily coexisted with both a Confucian vision of subaltern justice and modern political ideals of mass mobilization, both of which upheld the right to grass-roots participation in general affairs. The Huang Feihong films embodied these social tensions. While not all Hong Kong films of the period necessarily reflected this broad range of factors in a similarly overt way, the production history and distribution context of the Huang Feihong series rendered it particularly receptive to the uneasy network of political and economic forces, the complex social arena, of postwar Hong Kong.

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# **'Your tender smiles give me strength': paradigms of masculinity in John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer***

**JULIAN STRINGER**

Recent studies of film masculinity overwhelmingly still tend to concern themselves with the products of Hollywood. The focus of attention has seldom been switched to representations of masculinity in non-western national cinemas. In repeating once again a central argument of ideological film criticism – namely, that conflicting images of what it is to be male are produced at moments of social and political crisis – I would like to suggest that one of the most interesting examples of historical crisis in film masculinity today is that of the modern Hong Kong action cinema.

It is impossible not to treat the contemporary Hong Kong cinema historically because of the immanence of 1997, the year when one period of the settlement's history will end and another will begin with its return to Chinese sovereignty after one century under British colonial rule. The contradictory masculine images generated by this rapidly evolving situation have come to appeal to some western audiences. The profound uncertainty of the times in Hong Kong has produced narratives of loss, alienation and doubt, imprinting upon many movies the traits of an anxiety. Typically, this has been evidenced either by the manic pace and nervous energy of sequences in titles like *Do Ma Dan/Peking Opera Blues* (Tsui Hark, 1986) and *Fong Sai Yuk* (Yuen Kwai, 1993), or by a broad tone of sadness and

longing, experienced at both the action and non-action ends of the genre spectrum, as in the use of ghost metaphors by such important films as *Qiannu Youhun/A Chinese Ghost Story* (Ching Siu Tung, 1987) and *Yanzhi Kou/Rouge* (Stanley Kwan, 1987). However, it looks as if a special reception is being offered by the West to the nervous, anxious gangster films of John Woo. The best of these feature male characters who pull together the former tendency's energy and kinetic capability with the latter's feelings of sadness and loss.

Woo has consolidated his position as the primary representative in the West of the new Hong Kong action cinema on the basis of a number of masculinist texts. With the interest generated by the firearm extravaganza *Lat Sau San Tam/Hard Boiled* (1991), his arrival in North America to shoot his first English-language title, *Hard Target* (1992), and his stylistic influence upon Quentin Tarantino, in *Reservoir Dogs* (1991) and *True Romance* (w. Tarantino, d. Tony Scott, 1993), Woo has come to enjoy as much publicity and recognition as any of his Chinese contemporaries. One might certainly conclude from this that such success only goes to show how John Woo is currently the Hong Kong director most amenable to the taste of a popular western audience. While other directors, such as Jackie Chan, Tsui Hark, Wong Jing, Samo Hung and Ringo Lam, have achieved varying degrees of cross-cultural success with similarly spectacular action movies, Woo is the only one so far who has been invited to insert himself into the Hollywood system.

Although he has been directing features since 1973 and has worked within a variety of Cantonese genres, Woo's action film concerns have done most to aid his reception in the West as they are ideologically of a piece with the recent masculinist traditions of the commercial North American cinema. The US action cinema is habitually influenced by trends set in Hong Kong, a Chinese connection that raises two interesting questions. Firstly, as Yvonne Tasker points out, the close links that exist between the Hong Kong and US mainstreams have yet to be properly appreciated, which means that John Woo's ascendancy provides a useful opportunity to think more about the comparative treatment of western and non-western film masculinities.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, however, it is also true that John Woo represents a troublesome case – his films might not be the best way to tell us about these things. Amid uncertainty over what the levelling process of Hollywood will do to the cultural individuality of a Chinese director, some critics in Hong Kong have seen his success abroad as yet another example of cultural misunderstanding or orientalism, while Woo himself has expressed misgivings about his own 'un-Chineseness'.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, Woo's films might contribute to a western fantasy about Chinese cinema, one which is implicated in the complex and shifting power relations which mediate between the Hong Kong film industry's desire to achieve overseas success, and the West's ability to grant Asian films such international visibility.

1 Yvonne Tasker, 'Dumb movies for dumb people: masculinity, the body and the voice in contemporary action cinema', in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (eds), *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 243.

2 See Berenice Reynaud, 'John Woo's art action movie', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 3, no. 5 (1993), pp. 22–4.

In this article I want to suggest how two of Woo's most famous films are expressive of a uniquely Hong Kong perspective. Moreover, in enlarging the possibilities of the action film, in taking the genre in directions that are new or unforeseen, the films are interesting for the ways in which they construct competing paradigms of masculinity and for what they tell us about the city's historical situation. The titles I shall be referring to are *Yingxiong Bense/A Better Tomorrow*, the keynote 1986 gangster picture that revitalized the director's career by becoming a huge box-office success in Hong Kong (and a film that Woo has recently sold in the USA for a Hollywood remake), and *Diexue Shuang Xiong/The Killer*, a 1989 high point of the new Hong Kong action cinema triggered by the success of the earlier movie, and a film that has gone on to achieve cult hit status in the West. While it is important to remember that these two films never challenge or move outside of patriarchal relations, I shall argue that they can be seen to offer instructive variations on the vicissitudes of the masculinist text.

The critical approach I will take studies the emotional tone and feel of the two films, the affective economies they encode and encourage. This means that in largely passing over questions of male spectacle and display, sexual difference and gender as a masquerade, I will be stepping away from the Freudian and Lacanian paradigms that so dominate Anglo-US discussions of masculinity in the movies. This is in no way to deny the importance and interest of such reading strategies, nor is it to suggest that psychoanalytic concepts should not be used in the study of Chinese cinema. Rather, I take this approach because I would like to illustrate how psychosexual readings of masculinity need to be tempered by more ideologically-attuned, contextual work.

*A Better Tomorrow* concerns a gangster leader, Ho (Ti Lung), who is sent to prison after being double-crossed and then arrested in Taiwan, and his subsequent attempts to go straight. After his release, his old sidekick, Mark (Chow Yun-Fat), tries to persuade him to take up their old life again. However, Ho is more concerned with achieving reconciliation with Kit (Leslie Cheung), his brother in the police force, who holds Ho responsible for the death of their father. Ho's former position as gang leader has now been filled by his old subordinate, Shing (Waise Lee), who connives to play brother off against brother. As Kit becomes more estranged from his wife, Jacky (Emily Chu), Ho sets Shing up for arrest and prepares to let himself be taken in by Kit. In the end, Mark and Shing die violent deaths, while Ho and Kit are reunited at the very moment that the older brother must once again head back to prison.

*The Killer* concerns Jeff (Chow Yun-Fat), an assassin with a conscience, who accidentally blinds a singer, Jennie (Sally Yeh), during a hit in a night club. Tormented by guilt, Jeff is convinced by

Sydney (Chu Kong), his old partner, to take on one more job. Betrayed after its completion, Jeff finds himself pursued by both a gangland leader, Johnny Weng (Shing Fui-On), and a rogue police inspector, Lee (Danny Lee). After the reconciliation of Jeff and



**Chow Yun-Fat with Danny Lee  
(above) and friend (right) in  
*The Killer* (John Woo, 1989).**

Picture courtesy:  
Jerry Ohlinger's  
Movie Material Store.

Sydney, and the death of Randy (Kenneth Tsang), Lee's partner, the killer and the police inspector meet and start up a friendship. In the end, Jeff, Sydney and Weng die violent deaths, while Jennie is left blind and alone. Lee cries for the loss of his gangster friend as he prepares to meet the wrath of his superiors.

<sup>3</sup> Craig D. Reid, 'Fighting without fighting: film action fight choreography', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 2 (1993–4), pp. 30–35.

As these two brief synopses suggest, the films have many features in common: both are extremely violent (the cliché, repeated most recently by Craig D. Reid, is that Woo has remade traditional martial arts genres by replacing swords and knives with guns),<sup>3</sup> and both star Chow Yun-Fat, one of Asia's most popular and charismatic stars (indeed, it was his appearance as Mark in *A Better Tomorrow* that made him a household name); both revolve around the story of a gangster or other 'agent of the underworld' who is trying to go straight; and both feature important scenes where close male friends talk about loyalty, friendship and the impermanences of life as they stand on a road side overlooking the beauty of Hong Kong harbour. These similarities may very well constitute the trademark signature of a genuine film auteur, but they are also means by which the films can explore the ambivalent nature of Hong Kong-Chinese masculinity and construct a historical viewing subject.

In saying this, I am happy to fall out of line with many other observers of Woo's action films by trying to understand their notorious scenes of violence, rather than simply celebrate them. Western critics often refer to the 'Peckinpah-esque' comic strip goriness of Woo's movies, their 'ballet-like' orchestration of perforated and pulverized bodies, as if movie violence is fine and good so long as it is artily done or campily excessive. The question of why such bloodshed is there in the first place, how it functions in the textual system and how it relates and gives meaning to other aspects of narrative articulation, is seldom at issue.

If *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer* are masculinist texts, they are also caught up in the instabilities of a historically specific conception of patriarchal masculinity. In terms of a western reading formation, it is possible to see how the Hong Kong social environment of both films is marked by an ambivalent treatment of male subjectivity. This contradiction within male identity is achieved by what might be regarded as the mixing of two film genres.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has identified a particular historical trajectory whereby US popular cinema split itself off into male action or 'doing' genres (the Western, war films) and female 'suffering' genres (melodrama, the woman's film). Film theorists have given a great deal of attention to these genres in their enquiries into how different kinds of films create different kinds of male and female central characters, and so engender certain kinds of viewer response. For example, Nowell-Smith suggests that when it comes down to the construction of male identity, 'doing' genres delineate an ego-ideal male hero, whereas 'suffering' genres often impair the man's masculinity – 'at least in relation to the mythic potency of the hero of the Western'.<sup>4</sup>

Such ideas can be adapted into the context of the modern Hong

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'Minnelli and melodrama', in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987), pp. 70–74.

Kong action cinema to suggest that Woo's films collapse these two paradigms of masculinity into one. They combine simultaneously doing and suffering heroes. The films oscillate between scenes of extreme, sadistic cruelty and violence (such as the beatings of Mark in *A Better Tomorrow* and Sydney in *The Killer*, Mark's shooting up of the Fung Lim restaurant in the former film, Jeff's contract hit during the opening of the latter), and scenes of melancholic sadness and longing (Ho's father's bedside decree for his son to give up the underworld, the composed, ritualistic deaths of Sydney and Randy). Often suffering provides the catalyst for the leap into violence. Kit's inability to forgive his gangster brother in *A Better Tomorrow* causes him to act intensely, passionately, erratically, while Sydney's anguished desire to honour his 'best friend' in *The Killer* results in his being beaten to a bloody pulp by Johnny Weng and his henchmen. In all of these examples, violations of the body are outward manifestations of internal traumas, while painful inner conflicts can only be resolved by the outward projection of feats of incredible heroism.

At first sight, it might be recognized that these kinds of narrative tendencies are not altogether uncommon in US action films. Yet a filmmaker combining the gangster film with the melodrama is perhaps more uniquely in line with the hybrid nature of the Hong Kong film industry, where genres are more quickly mixed in with each other as a means for producers to stay one step ahead in the marketplace. In addition, something else is going on when the gangster film can become so entwined with the melodramatic mode, so conducive to melodramatic tears and the impairing of the male hero's mythic potency. Both *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer* are male melodramas, and both carry their doing and suffering, primarily by creative formal means, particularly a spectacularly affecting use of local music.

Consider the work of composers Joseph Ko, David Wu and James Wong for *A Better Tomorrow*. The film as a whole is suffused with wonderfully expressive Cantonese pop songs, but two orchestral themes predominate. The first is an action score associated mainly with Mark. An arrangement of this score opens the movie, as the gangsters are shown at work printing counterfeit money, and it is repeated during some of the film's most symbolic and emotionally charged moments. The strong pulse of the music connotes action and doing, just as its mix of orchestration and rock guitar recalls the music from old James Bond films and the soundtracks for such macho blaxploitation pictures as *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971) and *Across 110th Street* (Barry Shear, 1972). At the finale, it is hard not to be carried along by the fully-stated thrill of this theme as it accompanies Mark turning around in Hong Kong harbour in order to head back to save Ho, his 'best friend'. As the music guides the pace, Mark steers a speedboat with his feet and sadistically blasts his enemies to pieces

with a machine gun.

If the first theme puts masculinist strength and power in the service of loyalty to a good friend, the second connotes family relationships and obligations. (*A Better Tomorrow* is all about the disaster that can strike if that Chinese network of interpersonal relationships is severed.) First introduced as Kit and Ho meet in the police academy, it is then used in the following scene between Ho and their father. A lilting, haunting melody that is maddeningly hard to forget, it denotes pain, suffering and emotional trauma. The music here is used to accompany such perennially melodramatic themes as separation from a loved one, the break-up of a family unit, and the masochistic subject position occupied by those who do not do, so much as are done-to. One of the most moving uses of this theme links all of the above to the geography of Hong Kong itself, as it accompanies a panoramic track away from the harbour after Ho leaves Kit in order to embark on his fateful journey to Taipei. During the final scene, it is also this theme that helps reunite the two brothers.<sup>5</sup>

5 Having said this, I would want to point out that *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer* go beyond any strictly binary use of music. For example, an orchestral variation of the chorus of the second theme is used over images of Mark's death – that is, a character who has been explicitly linked with the first theme. This suggests to me that Woo uses music primarily for its melodramatic intensity, its emotional affectivity.

6 Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 20.

7 This technique is put to even more effective use when Anita Mui begins her theme song at the very moment her diegetic character dies in Tsui Hark's 1989 *A Better Tomorrow 3* (aka *Love and Death In Saigon*).

8 For cultural political readings of Cantopop, see two articles by Joanna Ching-Yun Lee: 'All for freedom: the rise of patriotic/pro-democratic popular music in Hong Kong in response to the Chinese student movement', in Reebee Garofalo (ed.), *Rocking the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), pp. 129–47; 'Cantopop songs on emigration from Hong Kong', 1992 *Yearbook for Traditional Music* (Ontario: Brown and Martin, 1992), pp. 14–23.

The brothers are brought together at the end of *A Better Tomorrow* on the words of a (mistranslated?) line from the theme song, 'Your tender smiles give me strength'. The emotional impact of this particular moment is overwhelming, partly because of its strategic placing at the end of the narrative, and partly because its lyrics provide the film's dramatic resolution. As Claudia Gorbman has pointed out, in commercial cinema 'songs require narrative to cede to spectacle, for it seems that lyrics and action compete for attention' – lyrics 'threaten to offset the aesthetic balance between music and narrative cinematic representation'.<sup>6</sup> The final song here is the fully-developed version of the second thematic melody I identified above, and its withholding until the final frames, in a film so suffused with mood music, produces an overdetermined music–image relationship of great emotional power.<sup>7</sup>

In Woo's film, 'A Better Tomorrow' is sung by one of the stars, Leslie Cheung/Kit, thus pointing to an important melodramatic component of the pleasure of these masculinist texts. Apart from being a famous movie actor, Cheung is also a Hong Kong pop star whose songs are popular all over Asia. As an original prime mover of the style called Cantopop, Cheung has contributed to that genre's cultural and political importance. Cantopop is a melodramatic style of popular song that recognizes the political realities of 1997 and migration from Hong Kong, and explores them through the affective coding of nostalgia and sentimentality.<sup>8</sup> When Leslie Cheung or Anita Mui sing the narrative, or in the comparable moment near the beginning of *The Killer*, when Jeff walks into a club and confronts another Cantopop star, Sally Yeh, performing her own sad diegetic song, film music speaks to a domestic audience about issues it knows are of very real concern.

The line 'Your tender smiles give me strength' can be taken as the

<sup>9</sup> It is significant that the dubbed version of *A Better Tomorrow* recently released in the UK and USA sports a completely rearranged soundtrack. Aside, of course, from bluntly gagging all traces of the Chinese language, the Cantopop songs have been completely hacked from the mix. Such barbarity changes the feel of the entire film, just to bring it more into line with the perceived requirements of a (tone-deaf) western audience. Leslie Cheung's final song has been given the chop, replaced by a macho, upbeat ending that forces us to exit smiling rather than crying.

perfect example of how the two films embody what I term the 'male melodrama of doing and suffering'.<sup>9</sup> The emotionally intense suffering the individual undergoes because of his attachment to a friend, brother, father, wife or employer is there in order to provide the strength needed for the superhuman acts of heroism and violence. This situation is indicated well enough by one of the publicity photographs used to promote *The Killer*. It depicts the scene where Jeff meets Inspector Lee in Jenny's apartment. The men are photographed holding guns to each other's heads while they gaze passionately into each other's eyes, the same kind of long, deep male looks that are also very apparent in the scenes between Mark and Ho in *A Better Tomorrow*.

Such male bonding around both passionate violence and passionate suffering can be taken in either of two ways. On the positive side, the loving, anguished, pained look of one impaired male melodramatic action hero at another embodies a same-sex bond of intense feeling to which a heterosexist culture does not normally permit access. On the other hand, such views privilege the male, patriarchal, masculinist, woman-excluding point of view. It is as if, in patriarchal capitalism, when a stable base of social security is lacking, men will strive that much harder to establish emotional links with each other.

*A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer* are probably not gay movies because, like the American buddy film of the 1970s, they repress rather than foreground sexuality. And while violence in these films certainly does act as a displacement for one man's erotic feelings towards another (as in Mark's final flourish with a tommy gun after he sees Ho and Kit, bloody but reunited, at the harbour), they are also characteristic of a more general way of treating sexuality at work in the mainstream Hong Kong cinema. Again, there are two ways of handling this. Firstly, Woo's conception of masculinity in these two films seems noticeably different from the 'hard bodies' tradition of 1980s US cinema in its refusal to assert phallic power through the fetishistic display of the spectacularly pumped-up male body, and this opens up the possibility of a slightly different definition of masculinity.

Secondly, the intensely painful or rapturous look of one man at another still needs to be returned back to changes in the law as it relates to homosexuality in Hong Kong in the 1980s. At the time of the release of *The Killer*, laws prohibiting gay sexual relations were in the process of being revoked, although actual sexual contact between men could still result in heavy penalties.<sup>10</sup> Along with the sex and nudity offerings of the so-called Category 3 films first popularized in 1990, the infamous designer lesbianism of isolated action titles like *Tung Fong Bat Bai/Swordsman 2* (Ching Siu-tung, 1991) and the occasional movie about Hong Kong's gay community, such as Samo Hung's 1989 comedy-thriller *Tsifan Seunghung/Pantyhose Hero*, Woo's films, in this sense, work to capture a prevailing undercurrent

<sup>10</sup> See Emily Lau, 'Out of the closet: government to decriminalize most homosexual acts', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 26 July 1990, p. 24; and Neil McKenna, 'Hong Kong ends gay ban', *The Advocate*, 27 August 1991, p. 53.

<sup>11</sup> It might be interesting to disentangle gay themes by looking at the input of Woo's producer, Tsui Hark, on these two titles. From *Diyu Wu Men/ We're Going to Eat You* (1980) onwards, Tsui has consistently offered presentations of Chinese homosexuality. For some discussion of gender ambiguity in films Tsui has either produced or directed, see Roland Chu, 'Swordsman 2 and *The East Is Red*: the "Hong Kong film", entertainment and gender', *Bright Lights*, vol. 13 (Summer 1994), pp. 30–35, 46; Julian Stringer, 'Peking Opera Blues', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 3 (1995), pp. 34–42.

of sexual liberalization in Hong Kong society. At the same time, they also compensate for the prohibition on depictions of actual physical contact between people of the same sex by giving their male characters such emotionally charged relationships. In other words, they kick against a prevailing orthodoxy, but only so as to reinscribe repression.<sup>11</sup>

So far, my analysis of genre-mixing and masculinity in John Woo's films has not really begun to answer the question of why *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer* are so emotionally moving, so full of desire, anxiety and nostalgia. As narratives of machismo, the two films do not have to be so compromised, so conducive to tears and affection. So why are they?

The bond that links cop to gangster in the Hong Kong action cinema tends to exhibit an affective obsession with mutual survival: both the law and the underworld are in the same boat, their moralities blur and cross over, and male characters who both rapturously, sadistically *do* and painfully, masochistically *suffer*, are brought together in their actions. The utmost concern is to visualize a man's ability to *feel* something very intensely.

It is worth standing back from the emotional contract these two films offer in order to ask some historical questions of how they deal with what Mas' Ud Zavarzadeh terms 'the cultural politics of intimacy'. For Zavarzadeh, discourses of ideology,

Represent intimacy as inevitably 'natural' and thus as private, asocial, personal, and, most important, transdiscursive – they mark it as situated outside the cultural series. This ideological representation of intimacy is politically critical because if intimacy can be represented as outside the reach of history and culture then, it follows, those who are intimate with each other derive their relationship not from a given historical and social situation but by virtue of their own panhistorical individuality.<sup>12</sup>

In seeking out a different, more 'interrogative intimacy', one that recognizes how forms of intimacy are 'always already limited by the historical situation in which the subject is located and thus by the subject positions available',<sup>13</sup> we can ask several more contextual questions of these two films. Why is it that such an ostensible exercise in masculine fantasy as *A Better Tomorrow* became such a success, appealing in the process, presumably, to both male and female viewers? Why is Chow Yun-Fat's suffering gangster figure such a contemporary archetype? And why does he die in both films, given that he is one of the Chinese cinema's top stars?

Certainly, the intensity of the domestic audience's response to the earlier film suggests that the Hong Kong audience perceived these male melodramas of doing and suffering to be more than just stories

<sup>12</sup> Mas' Ud Zavarzadeh, *Seeing Films Politically* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 113.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

about panhistorical individualities. The box-office validation they gave *A Better Tomorrow* in 1986 is such that other determinants suggest themselves.

If Woo's masculinist films construct a historical viewing subject through the extreme emotional pulls of his doing and suffering heroes, then the historical context is provided by Hong Kong's uncertainty over 1997, an uncertainty that has changed dramatically over the last decade (roughly since the signing between the British and Chinese Governments in 1984 of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Future of Hong Kong) as the relationship between the countries involved shifts in diplomatic fortune. Very often, the popular Hong Kong cinema has implicitly or explicitly registered such shifts.<sup>14</sup> John Woo, along with other industry personnel, has now left the territory, and has spoken pessimistically about the imminent reunification, but his films are left behind, as historical evidence.

The historical context for the success of the breakthrough film, *A Better Tomorrow*, has been sketched by a number of writers. John A. Lent refers to such factors as 'the political climate in Hong Kong . . . the people need a hero, a winner in the theater. Vicariously, they see the hero killing China'.<sup>15</sup> Chiao Hsiung-Ping points out that, in many Hong Kong movies from this time, the line between enemy and friend is often blurred, forcing the need for an appeal to some notion of 'brotherhood' and heroism ('Chow Yun-fat is a typical example of this sort of character') – she also sees the kind of guns-in-the-face stand-offs I have described between Jeff and Lee in *The Killer* as expressing 'China's deadlocked disunity of the last forty years'.<sup>16</sup> For Li Cheuk-To, *A Better Tomorrow* was released at just the right time to satisfy the 'audience's need to vent its frustration and anger' over the Daya Bay incident of August 1986, wherein China proceeded to ignore the wishes of the majority of the Hong Kong people by building a nuclear power plant in the Guandong Province of Southern China, not far from the border with a totally vulnerable Hong Kong. 'What better way for a frustrated people to give vent to pent-up feelings? But . . . all the film offered was a means to let off steam rather than a sympathetic response to the predicament of the Hong Kong people.'<sup>17</sup>

In *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer*, the historical viewing subject constructed out of this uncertain political climate is placed in an ambivalent position of identification *vis à vis* the camera and the characters – he/she is invited to identify with both actively doing ('killing China') and passively suffering (there is nothing Hong Kong can do to reverse 1997, and all that is left is the question of how the settlement will survive the Chinese takeover). To qualify these readings, however, it is important to remember that the cross-cultural reception of John Woo by western audiences can significantly alter how his films are perceived. If you go by North American and British reviews of *The Killer*, for example, you can expect to be exhilarated

<sup>14</sup> A key problem in the return of Hong Kong to China is the near certainty that Mandarin will replace Cantonese as the official language. This issue is raised in a recent Chow Yun-Fat title, *Treasure Hunt* (aka *American Shaolin*) (Ricky Lau, 1994). Here, Chow/Cheng goes to China and falls in love with a telepathic girl, with much linguistic comedy.

<sup>15</sup> John A. Lent, *The Asian Film Industry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 114.

<sup>16</sup> Chiao Hsiung-Ping, 'The distinct Taiwanese and Hong Kong cinemas', in Chris Berry (ed.), *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1991), p. 162. It might be suggested that these kinds of deadlocks as reinscribed by Quentin Tarantino films are just that, empty gestures which, divorced of any real context, signify nothing.

<sup>17</sup> Li Cheuk-To, 'The return of the father: Hong Kong New Wave and its Chinese context in the 1980s', in Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack and Esther Yau (eds), *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 174–5.

by the action, as if western viewers can happily identify primarily with the camera and its ability to bind us into a narrative image of action, enigma and resolution. But in Hong Kong, the emphasis may be on other things, with the camera and the star actors coming together to effect a 'magical' bringing together of impossible political contradictions.

Chow Yun-Fat has an important part to play here. While he may be known in the West primarily as an action man, Chow also brings comic, tragic and romantic sensitivities to his roles. In North America and Europe his image circulates as that of the consummate gun fetish only because we are not yet sensitive to the actual diversity of his output.

Starting out as a television soap opera star, it did not take long for Chow Yun-Fat to make the transition to big-screen matinee idol. He quickly gained industry prestige. In 1985, he won the best actor award at the Asia Pacific Film Festival in Tokyo and the Golden Horse Award in Taiwan for his role in *Dengdai liming/Hong Kong 1941* (Leong Po-chih, 1984). In 1986, he walked away with the Hong Kong Academy Award for Best Actor in *A Better Tomorrow*, and was back again three years later to collect the same award for his appearance in Johnny To's *All About Ah Long*. Between buying cabinets big enough to hold his trophies, Chow found time to act in countless films, including work for art-house directors Ann Hui (*Qingchengzhi Lian/Love In A Fallen City* [1984]) and Stanley Kwan (*Deiha tsing/Love Unto Waste* [1986]). What holds the range of such roles together are his good looks, easy charm, and a slippage between his being both totally in and totally out of control. His appearance in *A Better Tomorrow* might have sparked off fashion statements by Mark-identified young men in Hong Kong (many of whom took to wearing long dark overcoats, despite the humidity), but Mark still loses out by the end of the film; in *A Better Tomorrow 3*, Chow can't save the girl; in *Love Unto Waste* he's on his death bed; in *Dou san/God of Gamblers* (Wong Jing, 1990) he is king of the casinos one minute until he bumps his head and becomes as dependent as a new-born child the next.

This instability in Chow Yun-Fat's star image between being in and out of control helps the sense of how the masculinist nature of narrative in *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer* is put in the service of a historical situation seen in terms of paternity and survival. The male melodrama of doing and suffering is perfectly in keeping with the situation of a city caught in this impossible position, wanting to both acknowledge its real, impotent position, and also storm its way out of it. And both sides of the genre-mixing equation are pertinent too. The gangster film has been interpreted as itself an allegory about the need for Hong Kong people to possess survival skills (and the genre's popularity there may also owe something to the notorious underworld connections inside the film industry: Chow Yun Fat and Danny Lee

were among those industry workers who marched for Showbusiness Against Violence on 16 January 1992). The blurred boundaries between cop and gangster suggest a common social project, while the figure of an intermediary, intimate with both the law and the underworld (such as Kit or Lee) provides an apt enough metaphor for the resources that are needed to get by.

On the other hand, melodrama as a genre is all about survival, not so much in visualizing which skills can be actively deployed in order to reconcile one's will with the world around, but in terms of being overtaken by a temporal order that one cannot command. As Mary Ann Doane, quoting a number of other influential writers, has noted, time in the melodrama is often 'foreshortened and condensed', so that melodrama's 'rhetoric of the too late' demonstrates the 'irreversibility of time, its unrelenting linearity'.<sup>18</sup> Needless to say, the historical reality of 1997 is conducive to melodramatic narratives of temporality and recognition, of having 'too much too soon', or 'too little too late'.

With this in mind, certain textual features of intimacy in Woo's films take on new light. For example, Jeff and Lee's desire to shoot their way out of the church combines with the impossibility of these two blood-spattered heroes ever doing that. The need to stick together in both films is combined with an anxiety over whether anyone can actually be trusted (the pointed political Cantopop lyrics from *The Killer*, its sad and sentimental theme song – 'Who needs tomorrow when we have today?', 'Perhaps there will be no tomorrow/Only time will tell if we are meant for each other' – resonate in this context). The love a friend feels for another friend is compromised by a changing situation, one where the rules of the game are being violated, overturned and accelerated by people much uglier than the two friends themselves.<sup>19</sup>

Sometimes, men are unable to transcend these forces because they are blocked in their attempts to physically leave Hong Kong. There is a clear suggestion of migration in each film. In *The Killer*, just before the climactic moment when Jeff and Lee meet each other face-on in Jenny's apartment, there is a montage sequence showing Jeff pensively sitting by the Hong Kong seashore. Jeff has money to flee the city, but he is too emotionally attached to other people to actually go – he is left behind, trapped and suffering, as a boat floats past, a plane slides across the sky on its way to Canada or the USA, melancholy music plays on the soundtrack, and Sydney's voiceover sadly intones, 'Why didn't you leave Hong Kong? What made you stay?'. (Woo then cuts to the interior of the apartment house as an old woman chastises Randy for the neglect of his undercover work – 'I can't afford to fly away like a phoenix' – and the killer enters, about to be trapped by the cop.)

In *A Better Tomorrow*, aside from the moment when Mark turns his boat around and decides to fight side by side with his friend, or the initial separation of the two brothers by Hong Kong harbour, there is

<sup>18</sup> Mary Ann Doane, 'Melodrama, temporality, recognition: American and Russian silent cinema', *Cinefocus*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1991), p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> In an extreme *fort/da* scenario, Sydney leads assassins to Jeff no less than four times, but Jeff still sees him as the loyal sidekick.

<sup>20</sup> While watching the Chinese-language version of *A Better Tomorrow*, first distributed in North America by the video company Tai Seng, the pleasure I take from this text is inadvertently enlarged by the less than perfect subtitles. Confronted with my favourite one-liners ('Singing jollity like the sunbeam', 'Learning. That's what you've to learn!', 'Don't trust those cuntry!') I am left lost and linguistically floundering, adrift on an 'alien sea of undecipherable phonic substance'. (Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* [Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989], p. 68).

one particularly poignant moment. After a scene with Kit and the Police Chief, full of dramatic shouting and the latter's command to the former to 'be practical', Woo suddenly cuts to a jarring transition shot of birds scattering across water. Then, we are in a school rehearsal, where a group of toothy children sing for their teacher, Jacky, Kit's wife. The children are all smiles, but what they are actually singing about is nothing less than the diasporic consciousness of an entire settlement. The scene is played out as low camp, a feeling only enhanced by the English translation of the lyrics.<sup>20</sup>

Who can leave behind their homeland  
And forget their childhood?  
Who dare to look at yesterday's sorrow  
To take away our smiles?  
The youth don't understand the world  
And dirt their purity  
Let the teardrops to roll down your face.

Sing out your warmneso  
Stretch out your arms and hold your dream  
And the real you  
Your tender smiles give me strength . . .

On these words, Woo cuts to Ho meeting Jacky backstage. He tells her that he is leaving Hong Kong that night, and proceeds to give her the tape that will help his brother capture the villain. Jacky asks whether he will come back, and Ti Lung's acting brilliantly conveys the historical reality of Chinese migration from Hong Kong. A bashful smile to Jacky, as if to say 'What do you think?', a quick look over his shoulder at the children singing away behind him, another sad smile, just to confirm that he and the audience are all in on some big secret, and then a half-turn, a hesitation, a final walk back into the darkness.

This is not the kind of intimate scene that you might expect to find in a macho gangster film, and if by this time the hero has already had his mythic potency threatened and impaired, it is not so much because his actions have been critiqued by a woman ('You're giving up?', Jacky asks), as by the social forces which make all his actions conditional. Those forces affect every relationship in the two films, and they call into being the violence that is the fantasy solution offered by those who are left behind. Just as there is no better tomorrow for the Hong Kong action hero, the male melodrama of doing and suffering can only register the contradictions of Hong Kong's historical situation, not resolve them.

However, one symptom of *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer*'s masculinist status is that the intimacy shared by their central male characters is of a different order than that shared between men and women. The scenes between Jacky and Ho are moving, but between

Jacky and Kit there is constant antagonism. While audiences lap up the relationship between Ho and Mark, or between Jeff and Lee, the films squeeze intimacy out from where it would normally be socially sanctioned – romantic or familial relationships with women. Instead, in the male melodrama of doing and suffering, men take over the woman's right to tears and feeling, while simultaneously preserving their virile, active masculinity. Melodramatic reunions and expressions of love are played out under male eyes, producing contradictory texts – *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer* sadistically push, lock up and blind women, while placing centre-stage men who will not just be beaten but thrashed senseless, not just shot but ripped apart by bullets. The spectacle being offered here is as much masculinity as masochism as it is masculinity as active agency.

I would conclude from all this that while these two films of John Woo are undeniably masculinist and patriarchal, they do seem to recognize the instabilities within a historically specific conception of patriarchal masculinity. That last line from *A Better Tomorrow*, 'Your tender smiles give me strength', exerts a weird mingling of both the passive and the active, the suffering and the doing, together with a recognition of the fundamentally social nature of the construction of masculinity, its habitual dependence upon some form of intimacy and social contact.

Moreover, in terms of how western critical theory conceptualizes non-western masculinities, the two films also point out for us how hard it is to come to terms with any construction of gender identity outside of specific historical contexts. It seems to me that it is most useful to return Woo's films to the more psychoanalytically-inflected models of analysis favoured by recent film studies only after we have begun to open up some of the questions concerning the social and political nature of male subjectivity I have already touched on.

Inevitably such an approach will lead to questions of western spectatorial pleasure and appropriation on which I shall not elaborate here, but it is interesting to ask some tentative questions concerning the interrelation of race and gender in the West's reception of Hong Kong cinema. Steve Neale's influential 1983 *Screen* article on heterosexual masculinity, for example, is clearly of use in helping to analyse the John Woo phenomenon. Neale organizes some of his central arguments around a brief analysis of how Jean-Pierre Melville's 1967 French gangster film *Le Samourai* represents the 'gradual and eventual disintegration' of a (western) 'image of self-possessed, omnipotent masculinity'. Neale describes the film's dramatic turning point:

Alain Delon plays a lone gangster, a hit-man . . . Delon is sent on a job, but is spotted by a black female singer in a club. There is an

<sup>21</sup> Steve Neale, 'Masculinity as spectacle: reflections on men and mainstream cinema', in Cohan and Hark (eds), *Screening the Male*, p. 12.

exchange of looks. From that point on his omnipotence, silence and inviolability are all under threat.<sup>21</sup>

*Le Samourai* is one of John Woo's favourite movies, and *The Killer* starts out as a remake of this scene, wherein Jeff carries out an assassination at a club, accidentally blinding in the process Jennie, the singer with whom he had previously exchanged looks. Clearly, the trajectory of *The Killer* will now mirror that which Neale sees *Le Samourai* as taking – the male hero is disturbed in his illusion of unified and unitary phallic assurance, his body is violated and punished, his position as an 'ego ideal' is shattered by the threat represented by a woman. Also, as in Melville's film, the hero carries the burden of existential philosophy. Jeff is a single, solitary individual, his actions the mark of a tragic spiritual isolation. In the psychoanalytic lines pursued by Neale, such a position registers the narcissistic anxiety all men are supposed to feel over the recognition that their subjectivities are formed through the intricacies of sexual difference.

This very intriguing line of enquiry might then be tied into other approaches developed in the recent academic analysis of New Chinese Cinema. One writer whose work has achieved a degree of currency in this regard is Sun Longji. He makes a number of interesting assertions that might allow us to get some purchase on how the intercultural transposition of a 1967 French existential gangster picture into the 1980s Hong Kong cinema has repercussions for a comparative treatment of western and non-western film masculinities:

In Existentialism, a man [sic] 'exists' by virtue of retreating from all social roles and searching his own soul. If he fails to go through this process, he cannot become a man in the philosophical sense.

By contrast, a Chinese fulfills himself within the network of interpersonal relationships. A Chinese is the totality of his social roles. Strip him of his relationships, and there is nothing left. He is not an independent unit. His existence has to be defined by acquaintance.

. . . In Chinese, the words 'single' and 'alone' have the connotations of 'immoral' and 'pathetic'.<sup>22</sup>

It may be that, in the context of the American cinema's return during the 1980s to the image of the isolated, singular masculine ego ideal – the 'hard bodies' tradition of Rocky, Rambo and the Terminator, men who are encased in unified, self-sufficient shells for survival – *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer* utilize compulsory social intimacy in such a way that their extreme violence, *when seen in relation to their extreme suffering*, indicates an anxiety over the severance of those interpersonal relationships. This is to say that they are more about the threat of the withdrawal of intimacy than the stable security of an illusionary, omnipotent masculinity. And this may very

<sup>22</sup> Sun Longji, 'The long march to man', in Geremie Barme and John Minford (eds), *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience* (New York: Noonday Press, 1989), p. 163.

well constitute a more ‘interrogative’ form of intimacy. As an ‘un-Chinese’ Hong Kong filmmaker, John Woo seems to assert the importance of masculinist, interpersonal relationships (*Your tender smiles give me strength*) while, simultaneously, throwing them to the wind in a cynical admittance of the transient nature of anything that might be worth holding on to.

I started this article with the notion that the Hong Kong cinema is in a period of transition and crisis, and it is certainly the case that the language of crisis occurs in two other recent articles on John Woo’s films.<sup>23</sup> However, I am not unaware of Tania Modleski’s trenchant criticism of the ‘masculinity in crisis’ model of recent film studies. As she puts it, the most useful criticism of masculinity is that which is concerned with the effects of changes in masculinity *on the female subject*, and every word of her assertion that ‘male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution . . . men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it’<sup>24</sup> rings true. My response to this criticism would be to acknowledge its appropriateness here, but to add that, yes, while *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer* have very little diegetic interest in women, the interest taken by some women in John Woo action films is a subject worth investigating. Secondly, I would suggest that Hong Kong action cinema is somewhat unique in its crisis-ridden logic precisely because it cannot provide the system within which any new masculinity can be reconsolidated – if a forthcoming change of political fortunes brings the antithesis of the current system, what is left except uncertainty and crisis? (These two responses do not ‘excuse’ the films’ patriarchy and chauvinism. I am only trying to suggest the very real strain undergone by their male characters.)

Finally, it is worth pointing out that *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer* are not Tweedledum and Tweedledee – there is still a shift of emphasis between them, alerting us once again of the need to see Woo’s work as contingent upon historical context and the conditions of reception. Writing of the production of Tsui Hark’s *A Better Tomorrow 3* during the time of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing (Woo’s own *Diexue Jietou/A Bullet in the Head* was being filmed at the same time), Berenice Reynaud asserts that as a western critic it is ‘no longer fun to watch Chinese killing Chinese’.<sup>25</sup> Reynaud’s statement and passing critique of western spectatorial pleasure is one of which viewers of John Woo’s films have yet to take heed. Western fans of what the British Hong Kong fanzine *Eastern Heroes* likes to call ‘Heroic Bloodshed’ gangster pictures do not seem to have begun to confront the same kinds of challenges and dilemmas raised for white spectators by the work of new African-American filmmakers – namely, how do we respond to representations of violence against and between ethnic groups other than our own? And how do we make good connections between such violence and wider political issues?

<sup>23</sup> Jillian Sandell, ‘A better tomorrow?: American masochism and Hong Kong action films’, *Bright Lights*, vol. 13 (Summer 1994), pp. 40–45, 50. Tony Williams, ‘The crisis cinema of John Woo’, *cineACTION*, vol. 36 (February 1995), pp. 42–52.

<sup>24</sup> Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Berenice Reynaud, ‘China’s shadow falls across Hong Kong’s films’, *New York Times*, 15 March 1990, p. 24.

One way to answer such a question might be to ask whether the positioning of John Woo's films in relation to the western spectator's powerful gaze approximates Hong Kong's position in relation to 1997. At a crucial moment in *A Better Tomorrow*, Ho asks Mark the existential question, 'Do you believe in God?', to which Chow Yun-Fat replies, 'I'm the God. Anyone who can control his own fate is a God.' The scene is loaded because while the individualized, western male hero, worshipping his hard body by making it into the shrine of his own omnipotence, often strives to be a God, and while the existential hero strives to master his own fate by understanding his own identity, it is clear that with 1997 breathing down their necks, nobody who stays in Hong Kong would seem to be able to control their own fate. Patriarchal men – international gangsters operating under the cover of a multinational corporation, as in *A Better Tomorrow*, for example – illustrate this process particularly well because they are the ones with most to lose.

By 1989, as Sydney opens *The Killer* in a church full of doves by asking Jeff exactly the same question about whether or not he believes in God, Jeff replies simply, 'No. But I like the tranquillity here'. With that, there is a shift in tone. Sadder, more world-weary, more knowing in the gazes exchanged, the two men in the latter film play out its male melodrama of doing and suffering with an air of deeper pathos and resignation. Released at the time of Tiananmen Square, as real Chinese killed real Chinese, at the time when Hong Kong movie personnel fed money to the democracy leaders in Beijing, and when Tsui Hark, producer of Woo's most successful films, and Chow Yun-Fat, Woo's star actor and alter-ego, wept on the set of *A Better Tomorrow 3* as they heard the news from China over the radio and then injected their anger into the production of the movie, it is not hard to comprehend why *The Killer* should be that much more melancholic – or, indeed, why the stylized violence that western audiences like to hoot at and point to should now be that much more extreme, that much more apocalyptic, that much more despairing.

With thanks to Barbara Klinger and James Naremore for their helpful comments and good advice. I have learned a lot, too, from Yingjin Zhang's thoughts on the Hong Kong cinema.

# Avenging women in Indian cinema

LALITHA GOPALAN

That there has been an escalation of violence in contemporary Indian cinema is now a well-worn cliche. *The Illustrated Weekly of India* cashed in on this truism by publishing a roundtable discussion among filmmakers, critics and stars that explored the ‘correlation between violence in films and violence in society and the various implications of the nexus’.<sup>1</sup> The discussion attentively dwells on film as a mass cultural product, but fails to offer any specific link between a particular film or genre and its effects on society. What also remains unacknowledged in this discussion is how these films feed off the crisis of legitimacy of the Indian State, a crisis that unleashed an open display of the State’s coercive powers and precipitated most visibly after the state of emergency between 1975 and 1977. Even if it is debatable that the state of emergency is the origin for the crisis of legitimacy of the Indian State, at the very least we can speculate that it did set into motion contestations between power *and* authority which have pressed upon a more thorough exploration of hegemony, citizenship, community, nationalism and democracy in India. In short, discussions of violence have to consider how films replete with avenging women, gangsters, brutal police force and vigilante closures stage some of the most volatile struggles over representations that shape our public and private fantasies of national, communal, regional and sexual identities.

With less programmatic overtones, but with a cinephile’s nitpicking taste, Firoze Rangoonwala definitively names the decade between 1981 and 1992 ‘the age of violence’.<sup>2</sup> Assembling Hindi films with vigilante resolutions from both ‘parallel’ cinema – Govind Nihalani’s *Ardh Satya/Half Truth* (1984) – and the commercial

1 ‘Imaging you’, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, 29 May–4 June 1993, pp. 24–37. The participants included N. Chandra, Prakash Jha, Javed Akhtar, Meenakshi Seshadri, and Maithili Rao.

2 Firoze Rangoonwala, ‘The age of violence’, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, 4–10 Sept. 1993, pp. 27–9.

industry, he identifies a marked shift towards escalating violence in this period. Rangoonwala, however, does not comment on the social impact of these films as the roundtable discussion tended to do, but directs his sharpest criticism towards popular cinema for having 'succumbed to a hackneyed formula'. Arguably, dismissing formula-ridden popular cinema, however hackneyed it may be, unwittingly grants it processes of standardization of cinematic codes and narratives and, in turn, exorcises a widely held view that Indian cinema randomly picks up story lines only to finally deliver a *masala* film.

M. Rahman offers a less disparaging report of the Indian film industry in the 1980s by spotting the workings and consolidation of a new 'formula' in Hindi cinema inaugurated by N. Chandra's film *Pratighat/Retribution* (1987) and soon followed by *Sherni, Khoon Bhari Mang, Khoon Bahaa Ganga Mein, Commando, Bhraschtachar*, and *Kali Ganga*. The common theme of these films, according to Rahman, is their portrayal of women as 'hardened, cynical, vengeful creatures'.<sup>3</sup> Interviewing director Chandra and prominent actresses like Hema Malini, Dimple and Rekha, who have all played avenging women, Rahman provides alternative viewpoints from within the film industry. While Chandra suggests that these violent films are generated in response to the voracious viewing habits of an audience that wishes to see something different from the stock male 'action' film, the actresses argue that screenplays with dominant and powerful women are a welcome break from stereotypical roles as submissive and dutiful mothers and wives.

Maithili Rao too identifies an emerging trend in the industry, set off once again by Chandra's *Pratighat*, a trend that she calls the 'lady avengers'.<sup>4</sup> Arguing that they 'reflect the cultural schizophrenia in our society', Rao reproaches these films for being 'hostile to female sexuality' and for passing themselves off as nothing more than 'victimization masquerading as female power'. This feminist spectator's critique neither figures in Rahman's interviews with directors and actresses nor does it address the tremendous box-office success of these films, however perverse they may be.

This paper assumes that these contradictory and diverse readings of 'aggressive woman' films are provocative enough to warrant another look at their visual and narrative goriness; another reading of the configurations of femininity and violence staged in these films, I argue, will uncover the contours of their appeal. My reading strategies employed in this paper are indelibly shaped by feminist film theory that argues for formal textual analysis as a means to grasp the articulation of sexual difference in cinema. Although it tends to focus heavily on Hollywood productions, feminist film theory remains useful for at least two reasons: first, deploying it for an analysis of Indian cinema interrogates a monolithic conception of 'national cinema' and opens the possibility of exploring points of contact with international

3 M. Rahman, 'Women strike back', *India Today*, 15 July 1988, pp. 80–82.

4 Maithili Rao, 'Victims in vigilante clothing', *Cinema in India*, Oct.–Dec. 1988, pp. 24–6.

filmmaking practices; secondly, its nuanced theorization of scopophilia and spectatorship holds up extremely well for the films discussed here. Despite a general move to place Indian cinema within international filmmaking practices, I do want to argue provisionally at this point that any Indianess we attribute to these cinemas lies in the various ways censorship regulations of the Indian State shape and influence cinematic representations; we must acknowledge and theorize the presence of the State when discussing the relationship between films and spectators.

Tailing the critical reception of these films is the frequent use of the term ‘formula’, which is bandied about to belittle the structures of repetition between films and only tangentially accounts for the viewer’s pleasure. This paper explores how it may be equally possible that we are not only drawn to the visceral images in these films, but also to the various circuits of intertextual relays between and among them. Redrawn in these terms, I find it pertinent to call on the theoretically more viable concept of ‘genre’ which allows us to place industry’s suggestion that these films are different from male action films alongside critical evaluation which may condemn these films for cunningly representing female victims as vigilantes. In other words, only genre simultaneously addresses the industry’s investment in standardized narratives for commercial success on the one hand, and the spectator’s pleasure in genre films with their stock narratives structured around repetition and difference on the other. While culling production details from the industry to verify the spawning of genres is a legitimate line of inquiry, I employ textual analysis of different films to unravel the structuring of repetition and difference and firmly demonstrate the workings of a genre.

Pruning Rahman’s loose cluster of films around the figure of the ‘dominant woman’ where *Sherni/The Lioness* (1988) – a film closer to the bandit genre – and *Zakmi Aurat/Wounded Women* (1988) – a film closer to the police genre – are grouped together, we can isolate a genre of films I will call, after Maithili Rao, ‘avenging women’. A standard narrative unfolds in the following manner: Films open with family settings which appear ‘happy’ and ‘normal’ according to Hindi film conventions, but with a difference: there is a marked absence of dominant paternal figures. The female protagonist is always a working woman with a strong presence on screen. These initial conditions are upset when the female protagonist is raped. The raped woman files charges against the perpetrator, who is easily identifiable. Court rooms play a significant role in these films, if only to demonstrate the State’s inability to convict the rapist and to precipitate a narrative crisis. This miscarriage of justice constitutes a turning point in the film – allowing for the passage of the protagonist from a sexual and judicial victim to an avenging woman.

<sup>5</sup> See Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Peter Lehman, "'Don't blame this on a girl': female rape-revenge films', in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (eds), *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

This explicit resemblance to Hollywood B movies throws up a set of new issues: it draws limits to 'national' styles of cinema, forcing us to consider the exchange and appropriation of cinematic styles across national boundaries. Every 'national' cinema has, of course, to contend with Hollywood hegemony, but if the points of contact between Indian and Hollywood film are the much maligned, yet often experimental, B films, it raises a host of fascinating questions relating to taste and the distribution networks of B films in the Third World.

<sup>6</sup> Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, p. 154.

<sup>7</sup> See Aruna Vasudev, *Liberty and License in Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978) on censorship regulations.

The general features of this narrative and the production of horror in rape scenes point to its close similarity to rape-revenge narratives of Hollywood B films, especially horror films.<sup>5</sup> Critical writing on Hollywood rape-revenge films, particularly Carol Clover's work, suggests that the marginal status of these films, in contrast to mainstream Hollywood, permits them to address some of the unresolved and knotty problems on gender and spectatorship that are carefully regulated and managed by the mainstream. Clover turns to the sadistic and masochistic pleasures evoked by these horror films to suggest that B films are the 'return of the repressed' in mainstream Hollywood. Focusing on B horror films, where low production values are coupled with sex and violence, Clover argues that these films displace the woman as the sole site of scopophilic pleasure and open possibilities of cross-gender identification through the sadomasochistic pleasures encouraged by these films. The most compelling aspect of her work is the classification of these rape-revenge films within the larger rubric of *horror* films, a move that retains the sadistic and masochistic pleasures – prerequisites for watching a standard horror film – staged in these rape-revenge narratives. Clover concludes in the following fashion:

I have argued that the center of gravity of these films lies more in the reaction (the revenge) than the act (the rape), but to the extent that the revenge fantasy derives its force from *some* degree of imaginary participation in the act itself, the victim position, these films are predicated on cross-gender identification of the most extreme, corporeal sort.<sup>6</sup>

Instead of privileging the revenge narrative or the rape scenes as Rao does, it is more useful to explore how the narrative nuances of this genre are predicated on a cinematic logic that draws these two parts together. Rape scenes are not unusual in Indian cinema. They are, however, frequently subject to censorship rulings on grounds both of their irrelevance to the main narrative and the unseemly pleasure they evoke.<sup>7</sup> Yet rape scenes in avenging women films are indispensable to their narrative, repeatedly evoked as evidence in a court room sequence or repeated as a traumatic event experienced by the victim. In other words, the centrality of the rape scenes in the narrative heightens their intimate relationship to the subsequent revenge plot where, once again, there is a replay of negotiations between sex and violence.

While *Pratighat* is frequently cited as an originary moment in the avenging women genre, the combination of rape and revenge was already secured in B. R. Chopra's *Insaaf Ka Tarazu/Scales of Justice* produced in 1980. The latter's initial box-office success can be partly attributed to the heroine of the film, Zeenat Aman. *The Encyclopaedia*

*of Indian Cinema* describes the conditions of reception that shaped this film:

This notorious rape movie followed in the wake of growing feminist activism in India in the 70s after the Mathura and Maya Tyagi rape cases, the amendment to the Rape Law and the impact of, e.g., the Forum Against Rape which offered legal assistance to rape victims.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 416.

<sup>9</sup> For a useful discussion on the public discussion of rape and the women's movement, see Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma, 'Rape: a campaign is born', in Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma (eds), *Whose News?: the Media and Women's Issues* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994), pp. 43–50.

References to the feminist movement are obviously one of the determining features structuring the reception of this film, but its notoriety points towards a different route of analysis where we have to consider how this film relies on our knowledge of these rape cases as a point of entry into fantastical stagings of our anxieties about women, sexuality and law, anxieties that in turn are set into motion, but not resolved, by anti-rape campaigns.<sup>9</sup> Re-evaluated through generic details identifiable in later avenging women genre films, *Insaaf Ka Tarazu* unquestionably stands out as one of the early experiments in rape-revenge narratives.

*Insaaf Ka Tarazu* opens with a rape scene. A colour sequence showing us a medium shot of a screaming woman in a sari rapidly changes into a black and white shadow play. The silhouette of a man first chases and then disrobes this woman. Another male figure enters the scene and a fight begins between them. The film returns to full colour when the potential rapist is fatally stabbed. The following credit sequence is a montage of stills from various religious and tourist sites in India with the soundtrack playing the title song of the film. These two sequences juxtapose rape against representations of India and this association with India is further played out in the film by naming the female protagonist Bharati – the feminine name in Hindi for India. These first scenes suggest considering female rape as an allegory of a beleaguered nation-state, a suggestion that, however, is not developed further in the film.

The second rape sequence in the film is distinguished from the opening sequence by the continued use of colour footage and the absence of a male saviour. Using a calendar art print of a woman in bondage in the victim's (Arti's) bedroom as a reference point, the sequence provides glimpses of a rape scene that includes both coercion and bondage. Furthermore, the scene offers us another point of identification through the victim's younger sister, Nita, who accidentally walks into Arti's bedroom during the rape. Arti files charges against the rapist, Gupta. A number of social encounters between Gupta and Arti preceding the rape, combined with Nita's confused testimony, are employed in the court room to suggest that Arti was not raped but consented to have sex with Gupta. The court finds Gupta not guilty of rape.

The court's verdict in Arti's rape case comes as no surprise to the spectators, for the film mobilizes this doubt throughout the scene. For instance, Nita's testimony is crucial to this case but the defence lawyer

convincingly argues her inability to tell the difference between coerced and consenting sexual relationships. The film frames Nita very much in the mould of a horrified voyeur witnessing a primal scene, thus infusing the scene with both fear of, and pleasure in, sexual knowledge, instead of recognizing it as sexual violation pure and simple. The sadistic-voyeuristic pleasure also surfaces here through the poster on the bedroom wall. The viewer might expect the poster's subject to be identified with the aggressor, a traditional strategy. Instead, the poster shores up a confusion between representations of rape and rape itself – thus eroticizing the scene of violation and escalating our masochistic identification with this scene. Privileging Nita's relationship to the scene, the film also exposes, and depends on, our inability as spectators to tell the cinematic difference between a scene of sexual consent and rape.

Notwithstanding the relationship between Nita's credibility as a witness and the court's verdict, Nita's ambivalence presses upon another aspect of the film's narrative – the unfolding of the revenge plot. Keeping pace with the ambivalence around the charge of rape in Arti's case, the film delays and reserves the revenge scenario until it can represent an unambiguous rape scene. It is only after Gupta proceeds to rape the virginal Nita in his office that Arti's revenge is allowed. In the film's climax Arti shoots Gupta, circumventing a judicial verdict on Nita's case. The film closes with another court scene where this time the judge abdicates his office for failing to deliver justice in earlier rape cases. Closing the rape-revenge narratives around a court scene or a figure of the State is now a standard feature of this genre and stands in sharp contrast to the male vigilante genre where the figure of the State is repeatedly undermined, for example in *Nayakan/Don* (1987). Although *Insaaf Ka Tarazu* did not have spin-offs for another seven years, the film established some of the basic conventions that squarely locate it as the inaugural moment in the avenging woman genre.

*Pratighat* is retroactively a classic of this genre because of the manner in which it consolidates some basic strains of the rape-revenge narrative. The film revolves around corrupt politicians and the ongoing crisis over law and order in a small town. The female protagonist, Lakshmi, is a college teacher who lives with her lawyer husband and his parents. The film opens with several scenes of hooliganism orchestrated by Kali – a *lumpen* youth leader – in Lakshmi's town. These scenes are also strung together to lead us through Lakshmi's conversion from an ordinary, disinterested citizen to an active intervenor in Kali's reign of terror. Her complete conversion to an avenging woman hinges on a crucial scene when she openly confronts Kali by filing a criminal suit against him and refuses to withdraw it even when he threatens to harm her. As the stakes continue to rise in their confrontation, Kali finally resorts to a gendered resolution: he disrobes Lakshmi on the street in front of her house, with all her

neighbours and family watching in silence. This violation establishes the primary conditions for Lakshmi's revenge on Kali and his gang, and at the same time seals her estrangement from her husband.

Lakshmi is rescued from this scene of public humiliation by Durga, whose own life has been scarred by Kali's violence – she was gang raped by Kali's men, and her husband tortured to death – and who nevertheless continues to galvanize opposition to Kali. Lakshmi moves into Durga's home, recovers, and receives support for her own revenge plan.

*Pratighat* displaces the conventional representation of rape by reconfiguring the rape scene as a disrobing sequence at both the visual and narrative registers. Ironically, while Kali declares that disrobing is a part of the Hindu tradition, evoking the *Mahabharata*, cinematically the film disengages with all the conventional representations of rape. The entire disrobing scene is spliced as a medium-length shot, and in the final moment of complete nudity the film converts to colour negative conveying the full extent of this violation in Indian cinema. Moving away from the standard representations of rape scenes, *Pratighat* draws our attention to the visual proximity between scenes of rape and disrobing in Hindi cinema, and interrogates the ethics of a 'full view' circumscribing such scenes.

The scene of revenge where Lakshmi confronts Kali is also framed with narrative references to Hindu mythology and filmic gestures suggesting crossovers with mythological films from the Madras film industry and the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* television serials. Clad in a red sari, Lakshmi garlands and anoints Kali at a public meeting and then repeatedly strikes him with an axe originally intended as a gift to him. The final killing scene is edited by juxtaposing shots of Kali's larger-than-life cardboard cut-out against the onstage altercation between Lakshmi and Kali, fight scenes between Kali's men and Lakshmi's students, and colour negative stills from the original disrobing scene. The cardboard cut-out evokes an intertextual relay from the poster in *Insaaf ka Tarazu*, playing on the unrepresentativeness of rape in the former and suggesting that Lakshmi's aggressive attack in *Pratighat* is equally horrific. Moving the narrative focus away from a single killing scene to a general murderous chaos replays the film's own pet themes where rape is located alongside other social crimes like hooliganism and corruption.

Two contradictions must be noted. Even as the film is critical of rape, rape scenes figure periodically in the narrative, signalling in each instance the consolidation of criminality and vigilantism with an increasing displacement of the State's law and order role. Similarly, criminalizing rape, the conceit employed in this film, appears to identify with a progressive legal position, but we find it cannot respond to the sadistic-voyeuristic pleasure prompted in the cinematic representations of rape. Kali's death may bear a formal resemblance to the disrobing scene, but is not subject to the same censorship

regulations that underscore sexual representations in Indian cinema. *Pratighat*, nevertheless, irks us with the limits and possibilities of equating rape and revenge scenes and thus coaxes us to reconsider the masochistic underpinnings of the rape scenes in this genre. While the film relies on our masochistic identification in the rape scene to fully play out its horrifying potential, the sadistic dimensions of this very scene propel the revenge plot and remind us retroactively that the ensemble of elements in the rape scene is always a volatile marriage between sex and violence.

There are several reasons for *Pratighat*'s success, but its ability to summon horror in the revenge sequences is one which, in turn, opened the gates for other permutations and combinations of rape and revenge. The full import of prompting horror in revenge scenes is further developed in Avatar Bhogal's *Zakmi Aurat/Wounded Women*, released in 1988. Retaining the rule of targeting 'modern' women as victims – a fashion model in *Insaaf Ka Tarazu* and a college teacher in *Pratighat* – *Zakmi Aurat* picks a policewoman as its protagonist. With the rape scene occurring early in the narrative, the turning point emerges when the judicial system refuses to convict the rapists, in spite of policewoman Kiran Dutt's own testimony. Abandoning legal recourse, Kiran Dutt now joins forces with other rape victims in the city. Together the women come up with a fitting revenge plan: to snare the rapists and castrate them.

Kiran's gang rape is edited as a fight sequence that closes around a conventional representation of rape. The rape scene returns to the bedroom familiar from *Insaaf Ka Tarazu*, but with a twist. Refusing to linger on Inspector Kiran Dutt's body as the rapists strip her, the film instead focuses on the rapists as they tear down her jeans and fling them on the ceiling fan. The unrepresentativeness of the actual sexual act in this rape scene climaxes through a series of shot/reverse-shots of fetishized objects – the ceiling fan and a medium closeup shot of Kiran's screaming face.

The shot sequence employed in the gang rape of the female police officer creates the basic template for the castration revenge scenes. Again, details on the edge, like the doctor's operating gown, her mask and the overhead lamp, are excessively in focus and fetishized. The camera cuts off the entire abdominal region of the man, refusing to zoom in on a cloaked genital area. Rapid freeze shots of men's faces, and ninety-degree shots of the overhead lamp in the operating theatre signal the ongoing process of castration. This equivalence between the gang rape and castration scenes, spliced by repeating shot/reverse-shots of a face and an overhead object cinematically, attempts to balance rape and revenge.

Critics have lambasted this film for offering an improbable resolution to rape; however, such a reading assumes that films have an

<sup>10</sup> Farhad Malik, 'Fact and fiction', *Cinema in India*, Aug. 1981, pp. 5–8.

indexical signification to political reality instead of examining how their narratives repeatedly stage various fantastical possibilities of these very same realities for the spectator.<sup>10</sup> One of the crucial constitutive features of this genre is its vociferous stagings of 'reality' through familiar references: shots of real newspapers, photographs of Gandhi on courtroom walls, footage of the Indian flag, and so on. *Zakmi Aurat* relies more extensively on these elements than other films: the opening sequence shows us actual newspaper reports of various rape cases in India, and the film draws an obvious link between the Kiran Dutt character and Kiran Bedi – a well-known woman police officer in Delhi. Inhabiting the mise-en-scene, these authenticating details appear to be strategically placed to heighten our viewing pleasure of the unravelling horror plot, reeling the spectator into scenes of escalating horror that culminate precisely at the very juncture when the film plays on an uncanny resemblance to extra-cinematic icons and events. These narratives in general may not directly respond to, or satisfy demands of, justice in particular rape cases, but they do unleash scenes of resolution that both extend beyond the law of the State and expose the spectator's complicity in the terrifying rape sequences.

Defending the spectatorial pleasures ensuing from *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1977) – a film that bears an intimate relationship to *Zakmi Aurat* – Carol Clover writes: 'what disturbs about *I Spit on Your Grave* is its perverse simplicity, the way it closes all the intellectual doors and windows and leaves us staring at the *lex talionis* unadorned'.<sup>11</sup> Clover's comment is aimed at up-market films like *The Accused* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988), where the legal process takes over the narrative, leaving little space for the rape victim to articulate her torment, and substantially closes off the possibility of direct vigilante action. Her defence bears on my own reading of *Zakmi Aurat* where, despite the film's narrative simplicity, it significantly precipitates the problems attending the visual representation of revenge in these films. As we have seen, films in this genre rely on convincingly meting out vigilante revenge that must equal, or even surpass, the horror of rape. While this equation produces ongoing narrative tensions, visual representations of rape in Indian cinema also remind us of the authority of censorship regulations, and suggest the possibility of sadomasochistic pleasures structuring these rape scenes.

I have argued elsewhere that, despite overt protests at film censorship, the Indian film industry is crucially dependent on the presence of the State at the register of cinematic materiality for generating sadomasochistic pleasure.<sup>12</sup> The female body is always the object in focus, and is repeatedly subject to a withdrawing camera that banks on an intimate relationship between the psychic law ruling taboos and the State overseeing censorship. The rape scenes in the avenging woman genre are not far from this formulation, where the narrative informs us that the horror of rape is in part motivated by the

<sup>11</sup> Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, p. 151.

<sup>12</sup> 'Coitus interruptus and the love story in Indian cinema', Vidy Dehejia (ed.), *Gender and Art in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, forthcoming).

absence of the State, but attention to cinematic materiality suggests that the State, as censorship authority, is very much present as one of the crucial negotiating sites. Until the arrival of the revenge plot in these movies, rape scenes appear to be mere substitutes for sex, relentlessly eroticizing violence. It comes as no surprise that the criticism levelled against these films is sparked by a suspicion that violent sex is being flaunted as rape, a suspicion that also guides censorship regulations.

To mitigate and ward off such criticism, revenge scenes in these films have to be equally horrific in order to allow us to read the scenes of violent sex as rape *retroactively*. The narrative and visual machinations of this genre thus revolve around the problem of balancing rape and revenge: *Pratighat* settles rape by evoking figures of Hindu shakti goddesses and killing the rapist, whereas *Zakmi Aurat* resorts to an anatomical equation by suggesting castration as an act of revenge, and escalates the horror of rape by visually locating the castrated male body in an analogous position to the raped female body. Settling rape through castration resonates with a feminist utopia where, at least momentarily, the easy economic equation between the penis and phallus resolves the differences between gender and power that are constantly complicated by, and subjected to, the symbolic difference between the penis and phallus. The question is, while revenge narratives in this genre seek continuously to ‘match’ the horror of the rape, can they ever succeed?

*Zakmi Aurat* brings to a head the entire problem of visually and narratively matching rape with revenge through its absurd logic of five rapes to fifteen castrations, a logic that heralds a moratorium on this genre in its current configuration. At the same time, *Zakmi Aurat* spawned films like *Aaj Ki Aurat/Today's Woman* and *Damini* (both 1993), where the narratives not only create a difference between the raped woman and avenger, but also return to exhaust the possibilities of pleasure in violent rape scenes.<sup>13</sup> Even while revenge narratives, as Rahman informs us, provide female stars with more dominant roles, because women’s access to avenging power in these films is intimately predicated on rape as a violent litmus test of gender identity, rape scenes are never neatly cordoned off from Indian cinema’s extensive use of the woman’s body as a stand-in for sex, as a crucial site of scopophilic pleasure. Faced with these contradictory demands, the avenging woman genre surfaces as a giddy masculine concoction: the rape scenes provide the narrative ruse for the revenge plan while also providing the spectator with a conventional regime of scopophilic pleasure. Revenge allows female stars to dominate the screen, but the genre demands that a violent assertion of masculine power in the form of rape is the price to exact for such power. Clearly, at the periphery of this genre where the interlocking narratives of rape and revenge are less than minimally finessed, gratuitously deploying rape does not sufficiently dislodge or displace

<sup>13</sup> Other film productions include *Serai*, *Prema Passa*, and *Khoon Bhari Mang*.

conventional representations of women in Indian cinema or appease Rao's suspicions.

Located within the larger rubric of other violent action films produced in the same period, the more taunting feminist aspects of the rape-revenge films are most apparent in their narrative closures. Here the avenging woman's unhindered access to power is always limited by the arrival of the police; this finale differs markedly from the more assertive vigilante resolutions of the masculine genres like the gangster and bandit films. Coupled with the prolonged judicial sequences revolving around rape cases, the appeal of these rape-revenge narratives arguably rests on their ability to stage all the anxious points that attend the relationship between patriarchy and the State. If the social imaginary promotes a unity between symbolic law and the State, rape cases inject a dissonance between these sites of authority to remind us that 'issues' of honour and shame are only provisionally resolved through legal proceedings. For the victim, the State's betrayal in rape cases is equally accompanied by patriarchal abandonment and together they consolidate as the precipitating moment in the narrative that allows it to shift towards the revenge narrative. Faced with an orderless universe, the avenging woman narrative proceeds on a transgressive vigilante path, incites masculine anxiety about the phallic female, and opens the representational circuit for women on the Indian screen, but this unfettered power is undercut by finally reeling in the authority of the State and revealing the avenging woman's own overwhelming investment in the restoration of the social imaginary. Casting women as embodying and sustaining tradition recycles an old stereotype in Indian films; however, the forced closure in this genre only provisionally irons out the anxieties between patriarchy and the state.

Although both the narrative closure accompanied by the very conventional reintegration of the woman into the social order and the precarious necessity of rape in these films weigh down the radical potential of the revenge narrative, they cannot completely regulate the series of unstable desires and identities set in motion through the ongoing dynamics between rape and revenge. Finding anything subversive about rape-revenge narratives, both at the register of the cinematic form and spectator's pleasure, leads us to some tangled issues plaguing feminist film theory. Laura Mulvey's classic essay 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' argues that 'Hollywood style at its best (and all the cinema which fell within its sphere of influence)' offers pleasure by enacting a conventional heterosexual division of labour in its narrative structure between active male and passive female for the masculine spectator. Challenges to Mulvey's essay, besides her own revision through melodrama, have been mounted by feminist film theorists as they move into other genres of Hollywood,

particularly to B films that include horror, slasher and pornographic elements. Focusing on the less-than-best cinematic styles of B films that are directed at, and have, a loyal female audience and incorporate a heady combination of sex and violence, feminist film theory – Carol Clover's work on slasher films and Linda Williams's on pornographic films – has been forced to reconsider the dynamics between identification and pleasure, particularly sadomasochistic pleasure. Arguing for the presence of *sadomasochistic* pleasure in violent pornographic films, Williams writes:

... it seems to me preferable to employ the term *sadomasochistic* when describing the perverse fantasies that inform these films. While still problematic, the term at least keeps in play the oscillation between active and passive and male and female subject positions, rather than fixing one pole or the other as the essence of the viewer's experience. At the same time, it does not allow us to forget, as some celebrations of masochisms (e.g., Studlar or Samois) do forget, where ultimate power lies.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 217.

Drawing on Williams's economic articulation of sadomasochism, it appears that the rape-revenge scenes in the avenging woman genre similarly rely on the generation of sadomasochistic pleasure, a pleasure that unwittingly challenges, however provisional it may be, the straightforward sadistic impulses of rape in Indian cinema. Because rape scenes are inextricably meshed with the revenge plot in this genre, the masochistic dimensions of the rape scene far outweigh its conventional sadistic associations, while at the same time the unfolding revenge plot leans on provoking the spectator's sadistic investments in revenge and punishment. Interweaving sadism and masochism through different filmic moments, this genre upsets the normalizing fetishistic economy with the fragmented woman's body as the central object, but complicating these generic pleasures is the ongoing tussle between every Indian filmmaker and the State over censorship. As a result, it is precisely through overt submission to censorship regulations that the commercial film industry parodies the authority of the State, a relationship that is not unlike the masochist's relationship to patriarchal law; therefore, we may have to consider the possibility of the rape-revenge device as yet another ruse to circumvent censorship, resorting once again to the woman's body. At the same time, tightening the rape-revenge equation unwittingly opens possibilities for cross-gender identifications. Not resolving the gender imbalance prevalent in social power relations, the contradictory forces of Indian commercial cinema beg for a reconsideration of the other identifications available in this heady combination of sex and violence. Responding in part to the debates on violence in Indian cinema which cast these representations solely in terms of their regressive effects on society, I suggest instead that violent scenes circumscribed by cross-cutting genre features and pressures can, in surprising ways,

challenge patriarchy's normalizing overtones on the issue of gender, and constitute one of the crucial axes of spectator interests in these films.

Arguably, rape-revenge narratives are not available as positive models for feminist utopias, but they do stage the aggressive and contradictory contours of sexual identity and pleasure that in turn throw up aggressive strands of feminism. I am not salvaging the film industry's regressive casting of female roles, but I do want to suggest that cross-cutting pressures from both the female star system and feminist movement have colluded to stage some of our unacknowledged aggressiveness, both public and private, which also underscores our understanding and articulations of sexual identities.

Before we commit ourselves to the idea that all roads to female aggression inevitably lead us to rape scenes in Indian cinema, it is worth remembering that this tight relationship between rape and revenge is a recurrent feature in Hindi cinema. Whatever peculiar production rationale helps to fortify this link, the yoking of rape with revenge cannot be disconnected from the modes of address structuring Hindi cinema: a national audience is always already its imagined addressee. In other words, its desire to command a national audience severely shrinks Hindi cinema's ability to stray from a successful, yet conventional paradigm.

However an appraisal of other regional cinemas, particularly Telegu films with the actress Vijayshanti in the lead, demonstrates that there are other contours to aggression, without the routine rape scene. Dispensing with rape scenes, these films allow aggression to shadow desire. On another register, these films lend themselves to a rich reading of regional and global cinematic issues. For instance, as Telegu films they are in constant dialogue with political dramas – a *forte* of the Telegu film industry – challenging the masculine rule of this genre. As female-centred action films, they recall Nadia's stunt films from the 1930s to the 1950s, and their agility reminds us of a slew of films and television shows from *Suzie Wong* to *Charlie's Angels*. In addition, as films initially made in Telegu and subsequently dubbed into Hindi and Tamil, they raise interesting issues about the new economics of dubbing that has gained a national market for regional cinemas.

Rumours and reports from the industry claim that Vijayshanti is one of India's highest paid female stars whose cachet at the box office is greater than most of her male counterparts. However, she too has had her share of rape-revenge narratives – *Pratighat*, for instance, is a remake of a Telegu film *Pratighatan*, which has Vijayshanti cast as the avenging woman – and is not altogether protected from playing the submissive wife, in *Eashwar* (1992); nevertheless she manages to corner some of the most spectacularly aggressive roles in Indian

cinema. Vijayshanti's own self-representation does not rest on emulating other heroines but, as she puts it: 'I always have to kick and pound the villains to pulp. That's why I'm called the Amitabh Bachchan of Andhra Pradesh.'<sup>15</sup>

When examining rape-revenge narrative, I steered away from considering the influence of the female star economy, choosing instead to focus on textual analysis. But when faced with Vijayshanti's films – for example, *Tejaswini* (1991), *AutoRani* (1992), *Rowdy Inspector* (1991), *Streetfighter* (1994) and *Superlady* (1991) – despite their different directors, they hold together as if to constitute a genre, and challenge my own marginalization of the female star economy in my previous readings of the avenging woman films. Each of her films upturns several conventional associations between femininity and aggression, but all too often their narratives tend to characterize female aggressiveness as a feature belonging exclusively to the pre-Oedipal phase. Kodi Ramakrishnana's *Police Lock Up* (1992), on the other hand, refuses any narrow casting of female aggressiveness and, in turn, allows for an intriguing relationship between law and desire.

The narrative takes the following route: Vijaya – Vijayshanti – is an upright police officer who arrives in the town of Vishakpatnam to investigate a political assassination. She has to contend with corrupt policemen and a conniving and ambitious chief minister – Panjaraja – who we know is responsible for the assassination. Panjaraja accuses her of being a terrorist and Vijaya is thrown into jail. A second storyline now unravels: Shanti – Vijayashanti's double role – is the wife of a zealous police inspector – Ashok – who is frequently transferred because of his honesty. Shanti is obviously cast as Vijaya's alter ego: meek, clad in a sari, devoted to her husband and pining for a child. It is precisely this guilelessness that lands her in jail one curfew night. The police throw her into Vijaya's cell and the two see each other for the first time. Unlike stories of lost sisters and brothers that recur in Indian films, this scene does not drag in mothers and fathers to claim kinship between the two women. Instead, it moves quickly through the respective events that brought the two women to jail. The crucial detail that lends credibility to Vijaya's story of her capture is Shanti's encounter with a dying journalist who, mistaking Shanti for Vijaya, passes on details of yet another assassination scheme. Shanti suggests that they switch places so that Vijaya can complete her investigation and arrest the corrupt chief minister. Vijaya reluctantly agrees, and the following morning leaves with Ashok, now passing as his meek wife. The film now gallops along, plotting Vijaya's pursuit of the Chief Minister. We see her move effortlessly from sari to jeans, from submissive daughter-in-law to strong and masterful police official. Through various twists and turns that include the notorious international assassin John, the film ends in a temple courtyard where Vijaya and Ashok annihilate the villains. The wily

politician is the last to go; Vijaya blows him up with his own bomb, strapped on with a belt, reminding viewers of the way Rajiv Gandhi was killed. The film closes with Vijaya and Shanti embracing.

Departing radically from both the rape-revenge narratives and male action films, *Police Lock Up* reconfigures the relationship between power, authority and gender, opening up a wide range of fantastical possibilities for feminist identifications. There are many obvious scenes of positive identification secured in the film. For instance, the film introduces Vijaya as a police officer driving her jeep through a series of slow-motion shots, thus breaking away from the routine logic of passage from victim to avenger in the rape-revenge genre. The film ungrudgingly celebrates her ability and success as a police officer by showing us elaborate details of her work: there are several fight scenes where both guns and kung-fu fighting styles are exhibited; her acumen and confidence with technology are shown more than once. My own favourite scene is when Vijaya, dressed as Shanti, uses a video camera to shoot an exchange among Panjaraja's hoodlums. She then replays this scene in slow motion and decodes their conversation through lip reading in order to discover where a kidnap victim is hidden. These scenes suggest the presence, possibility and intervention of female control over modern sites of technology which are all too frequently represented as male prerogatives. Collectively, these details easily constitute the bedrock of any feminist primer on positive identifications, but they fit too neatly and are too far from the messy economies of identification and desire that cinematic spectatorship thrives on. What we do see in *Police Lock Up* is a woman's excessive investment in the law, a law that we often mistrust for the ways in which it gives feminism short shrift.

The cornerstone of this film's innovativeness, however, is its deployment of the double role. Indian cinema has long been fascinated with double roles and utilizes them both to recognize and bank on a star's popularity. When female double roles surface, for example in Ramesh Sippy's *Sita aur Gita/Sita and Gita* (1972), the narrative revolves around separate lives and identities of twins, and conventionally closes on family romance: lost siblings, cast as opposites, find each other, find their parents, and so on. In sharp contrast, *Police Lock Up* refuses to recuperate the family: Vijaya and Shanti are not lost-and-found twins, and their resemblance is never resolved narratively in the film. Demonstrating that the two women effectively and easily pass for each other – Vijaya as the submissive wife and Shanti as an aggressive officer – the film mobilizes change in each woman and closes around a less polarized distinction between the two. Obviously the blurred distinction between them draws this film dangerously close to the horror film genre on twins.<sup>16</sup>

Rejecting a narrative closure around biological kinship, this film wrings out the full effects of masquerade. Vijaya's competency is asserted through her ability to masquerade not only as Shanti, but also

<sup>16</sup> Horror films on twins similarly do not possess the cushion of a family romance and play on all the horrific aspects of twin identities and the twinning reproductive process itself. The most competent film in this genre is David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* that takes on both Peter Greenaway's avant-garde film *Zed and Two Noughts* and Bette Davis's *Dead Ringer* to render a technohorror film that borders on incest.

a telephone line repair man and the killer John at various points in the film. Masquerade controls and mobilizes this film's narrative.

<sup>17</sup> Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as a masquerade', in Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (eds), *Formations of Fantasy* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 35. Mary Ann Doane's essays are good examples of this kind of appropriation. See Mary Ann Doane, 'Film and masquerade: theorizing the female spectator', *Femmes Fatales* (New York: Routledge, 1991); 'Masquerade reconsidered: further thoughts on the female spectator', *Femmes Fatales*, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> John Fletcher, 'Versions of masquerade', *Screen*, vol. 29, no. 3 (1988), p. 55.

Joan Riviere's conceptualization of masquerade continues to abet theorizations of cross-gender identifications that attend the female spectator when viewing a masculine-ordered universe in Hollywood cinema.<sup>17</sup> Among all the available appropriations in film theory, John Fletcher's reworking stands out for returning to the signifying form of the film as a potential site of masquerade. He writes:

The importance of Riviere's conception of the masquerade is that it constitutes a transgressive doubleness, an inscription of alternative wishes. The potential for a critical distance from the mythemes of femininity (passivity, responsiveness, deference, flattery, etc) is lodged already within it and the narratives it might generate.<sup>18</sup>

Reconsidered for the film on hand, it can be said that masquerade functions at different levels in *Police Lock Up*. The film is clearly located within the male action film genre where restoration of law and order dominate the narrative and always close on a conventional rearrangement of law and order. Usurping the standard male hero's role, that is, masquerading as a police officer, Vijayashanti plays this role to its full. The film supports this masculinization completely, for instance, by holding off song and dance sequences exclusively around her. Reeling Shanti into the narrative as an upright inspector's wife is a perfect foil for providing a feminine domestic space that both cushions and counterpoises Vijaya's aggressive public self, and together the two roles demonstrate Vijayashanti's ability to perform across different and competing terrains. Doubleness is further supported by naming the characters from parts of the star's full name thus 'assuring' the masculine subject, as proposed by Riviere, that behind the mask lies this powerful phallic figure that unites both halves of polar screen personalities.

The double role in this film also actuates a different fantastical staging of desire. The lack of parental origin as a reason for their resemblance unhinges the film from closing around a cosy sibling unity, while simultaneously unleashing a desire for the other. For instance, when Shanti suggests they switch places, the scope of this offer clearly extends to her spouse – we see Vijaya effortlessly passing for Shanti in her home, even masquerading her love for Ashok. It is only later in the film that Ashok reveals that he suspected Vijaya was not Shanti when she rejected his sexual demands. Of course, the film suspends all knowledge on the exact moment of his discovery, leaving open the possibility of a sexual interaction between Ashok and Vijaya. The switch thus opens the possibility of Ashok being exchanged as a sexual object between them.

We have seen the male version of this arrangement first proposed

- <sup>19</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer and Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). For a pithy elaboration of Levi-Strauss and Lacan see Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London: Macmillan, 1982).
- <sup>20</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

- <sup>21</sup> Edmund Leach, 'Anthropological aspects of language: animal categories and verbal abuse', in Eric H. Lenneberg (ed.), *New Directions in the Study of Language* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1964), p. 23.

- <sup>22</sup> Avital Ronell, interview, *Re/Search*, no. 13 (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1991), p. 142.

by Levi-Strauss and then ingeniously resurrected by Lacan and revised by feminists.<sup>19</sup> Eve Sedgwick's reformulation in *Between Men* shifts the exchange of women between men from a heterosexual matrix to homosexual.<sup>20</sup> Sedgwick proposes that women are exchanged between men to avert, ward off and occlude the articulation of homosexual desire for each other, while simultaneously oppressing women and producing homophobia. These terms seem uncannily reversed in *Police Lock Up*, raising the possibility that Vijaya and Shanti's full scale switching is driven by a desire for the other, however narcissistic it may appear. This reading is further endorsed by the final moment of the film where we see them embracing, a closure that displaces and postpones heterosexual resolutions.

Although Vijaya has been the focus for most of the dramatic moments in the film, Shanti too provides enough dissonance in the plot despite her conventional representation of passive femininity: she not only initiates the idea of the switch but also remains extremely loyal to her role as Vijaya in spite of arduous conditions in the jail. But it is in a more eccentric detail that her location in the plot allows for displacements. The film elaborately informs us that Shanti's anxiety about having children has absurd effects on her behaviour: she daydreams about phantom children, upsets her husband's work routine by demanding his presence at various fertility rituals and, above all, she has a pathological attachment to a dog whom she treats as her child.

I am reminded here of Edmund Leach's stimulating essay 'Animal classification and verbal abuse', where he argues for an intimate relationship among human classification of animals, verbal abuse and incest taboos.<sup>21</sup> There is an unrelated, yet similar, take on domestic pets by Avital Ronell in an interview where she expounds on the Bush family and pets after Millie's 'autobiography' was published. She comments:

I remember telling people, 'Watch their rapport to the dog, because here is where they articulate things that are taboo, that are unconscious'.<sup>22</sup>

Shanti's attachment to Caesar and her attempts to anthropomorphize, cast aspersions on the fertility of this heterosexual unit, particularly on her husband and his ability to reproduce. Furthermore, her incapacity to differentiate between dog and child in many scenes, a difference that conventionally marks so many sexual, dietary and verbal taboos, casts asunder all normative images of a reproducing human family, and even anticipates the remarkable switch suggested and promoted by her. The film encourages her attempts to humanize Caesar by providing the dog on more than one occasion with subjective point-of-view shots. Notably, Caesar supports her switching places with Vijaya without a bark of protest, and, unlike Ashok, he can spot the difference between the two women. The exchanging of husbands

and circulating of fetishized objects such as dogs between them allows us to read these movements as circuits of desire between Vijaya and Shanti, thwarting our expectations of the normative heterosexual closure to most tales about twins. Curiously, this intimate bond between Vijaya and Shanti permits representations of other kinds of transgressions: Ashok's uncle is indisputably cast as a stereotypical homosexual, and surfaces as a symptom of the film's nascent homophobia; and Panjaraja, the chief minister, schemes to have his own daughter kidnapped to gain political ground, a motive that violates most conventions of paternal affection.

The film galvanizes one of the most common signs of love we can procure in Indian cinema to stage desire – a song and dance sequence spliced together as a dream sequence from Shanti's point of view. Triggered by Vijaya's visit and finding herself pregnant, Shanti longs to go home, but instead lulls herself to sleep by singing a song. This sequence is set around a pregnancy ritual, and she begins a duet with her husband, but soon substitutes him with Vijaya and the song closes around their embrace. Like the final embrace of the film, here too the heterosexual convention of these songs in Indian films is subverted. In the absence of any clear performative declaration of a lesbian identity in the film that may allow for a straightforward reading of a lesbian desire plot, I propose that *Police Lock Up* approximates a female buddy film genre that allows and encourages a staging of lesbian fantasies. As a police narrative, the film shadows and masquerades the male action genre to the hilt while surreptitiously displacing conventional expectations and resolutions attending its masculine counterpart.

In sharp contrast to the avenging woman genre, where the inept law and order system allows for the avenging plot to unfold with a closure that reintegrates the woman into the social and civic order, *Police Lock Up* and other Vijayashanti films harbour a less antagonistic relationship to the law. Located directly within the law, most prominently played out in *Police Lock Up*, the female protagonist is constantly settling law and order problems produced by corrupt politicians and policemen, a relationship with the State that is unabashedly accommodational. Nevertheless, Vijayashanti films raise some of the most knotty and unresolved problems attending representational struggles around femininity, violence and the State.

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## **Symbol, narrative and the musics of *Truly, Madly, Deeply***

**ROBYNN STILWELL**

Few films, including musicals, have relied so heavily on music for storytelling as *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (Anthony Minghella, 1990), an intimate romantic comedy that explores grief and mourning. The music is an integral part of the film's narrative, and essential in the development of its main characters: Nina is an amateur pianist devastated by the sudden and unexpected death of her lover, Jamie, a cellist. The use of music in the film transcends the boundaries of classical film scoring and gives psychological depth to the utopian, but often emotionally static, musical number. The traditional functions of a non-diegetic score are to provide emotional inflection within a scene and continuity between scenes while doing its work unnoticed, but the underscore of *Truly, Madly, Deeply* interacts with other cinematic elements and with other musics in the film to an unprecedented degree, generating a layer of purely musical symbolism. The traditional musical number is celebratory or reflective; it is the dilation of a moment in time, a lingering over an emotion as it is experienced in that moment. But in this film, the musical numbers actively construct the relationship between the characters, a relationship established long before the commencement of the film's narrative and therefore not available to the unusual cinematic devices for demonstrating the development of such intensity and complexity.

Music is often relegated to a subsidiary function in film, even by those for whom the music is a central concern. This is undoubtedly a manifestation, however unconscious, of Rick Altman's

double-whammy of fallacies, the historical and the ontological, about the relationship between sound and image:

Instead of treating sound and image as simultaneous and coexistent, the historical fallacy orders them chronologically, thus implicitly hierarchizing them. . . . The version of the ontological fallacy regularly applied to cinema claims that film is a visual medium and that the images must be/are the primary carriers of the film's meaning and structure.<sup>1</sup>

1 Rick Altman, 'Introduction: cinema sound', *Yale French Studies*, no. 60 (1980), p. 14.

A specialized subset of cinema sound, music is on even more precarious grounds for two reasons which might seem logical, if one were governed by these fallacies: first, it is usually non-diegetic, so it is not an active participant in the cinematic realm to the extent that, say, even lighting or set design is – in other words, it does not impact on the characters in the narrative; second, it is almost always added in the post-production phase and is, sometimes literally, the last thing added to a film before it is shipped to the distributor. According, then, to a specific version of the general historical fallacy, music is of little importance because it comes after everything else in the filmmaking process. The 'logic' of these fallacies is further ingrained by the strain of film studies which dominated throughout the field's formative years, that is auteurism. The concentration on the creation of a film rather than its reception almost necessarily compartmentalizes the various elements of such a highly collaborative art and demotes in importance those elements not directly controlled by the designated 'auteur'. Yet the completed film is received as a totality by the spectator/auditor, and the soundtrack, music included, will work on the audience at the same time as the image does.

The scoring ideal is still, to a very great extent, that of the classical Hollywood cinema; that is, it should be unobtrusive, invisible, 'unheard'.<sup>2</sup> The exception, of course, is the musical, where the music is the focus – and necessarily composed first, unwittingly playing into the specific historical fallacy – and the rest of the film sometimes merely an excuse for the music. Although the Hollywood musical seems to have gone the way of the dinosaur, the use of pre-recorded popular songs in films has increased over the past quarter of a century.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes these songs function no differently than the classical non-diegetic underscore or ordinary diegetic ('source') music, and sometimes they are very specifically chosen for the cultural connotations that they will bring to the scene when recognized by the audience. This is certainly true in *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, which mixes musics in what may at first seem an indiscriminate hodgepodge. However, most of the music was written specifically into the screenplay and is part of a rich network of symbols that operate overtly, but rarely obtrusively, throughout the film.

The music in *Truly, Madly, Deeply* is widely varied in style, and it functions on several narrative levels: as classical film underscore,

2 For the best overview of classical Hollywood musical practice, see Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987). For an excellent demonstration of how pervasive the practice still is, see Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), which includes analyses of film from the 1980s, particularly *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Robocop*.

3 No doubt this increase is due in large measure to the marketing principle of 'synergy', or cross-promotion between film and music, mediated by the use of music video. However attractive this strategy is not usually as successful as its prevalence would suggest. See R. Serge Denisoff and George Plaskates, 'Synergy in 1980s film and music: formula for success or industry mythology?', *Film History*, vol. 4, no. 3 (1990), pp. 257–76.

inflecting the emotional content of the scene and providing temporal direction within and between scenes; as a representation of the main characters and their changing relationship to one another; and as illumination and foreshadowing of Jamie's motivations, not explicitly revealed until the end of the film. Different music is used for each function: composer Barrington Pheloung provides the underscore; the music of J.S. Bach represents the characters and their relationship; popular songs are the carriers of motivation. The placement of these various musics in respect to the diegesis highlights their disparate styles and functions. The pop songs are source music, performed on screen by characters in the film. The underscore is, by definition, non-diegetic music which can affect only the audience. But the Bach slides between diegetic and non-diegetic music, sometimes beginning as one and ending as the other, or remaining ambiguously suspended between the two. Although the music operates in these three different conceptual spaces – narrative, style and placement – and each of these is further divided into three contrasting elements, each type of music does not remain segregated in its niche, nor is there some mathematical relationship between this trinity of triads. The various musics continually interact with one another, and with the visual and verbal imagery in the film, carrying with them ingrained cultural meanings which extend their impact beyond even this complex matrix of functions, particularly in relation to the high/low culture split between Bach and the pop songs. The density of symbolism in the film generally almost replaces, or even precludes, narrative motion, and in order to understand the musics' integral role in the fabric of the film, we must tease out the various strands that weave together so tightly.

Although my first gambit in opening up the film may appear to be a backsliding into the auteurism I earlier criticized, I wish to emphasize that this is really just an *appearance*, as I establish the *dramatis personae* involved and their relationship to one another and to the film. In practice, the film was apparently as collaborative an effort as any film is likely to be. The screenplay was written and directed by Anthony Minghella, and the presence of a writer–director is an open invitation to those with an auteurist bent. But Minghella wrote the film specifically for actress Juliet Stevenson, incorporating into her character a great deal of her own personality, including her relationship with actor Alan Rickman. The personal quirks of the two close friends (not lovers, as in the film) formed the basis of the onscreen characters and their relationship – for instance, the friction caused by her disorganization and his unwavering certainty in his own opinions – so even the screenplay was deeply imprinted by the actors. In the foreword to the published screenplay, Minghella also thanked Rickman, a successful theatrical director as well as actor, for his contributions 'behind the camera'. In the script Minghella specified the diegetic music in detail, strengthening the opportunity to see him as

auteur, but composer Barrington Pheloung's mediation through not only his underscore, but also his arrangement of the most prominent of the pop songs, is just as crucial in the musics' working as was the selection. But perhaps we should start with a more conventional analysis of the film before tackling the subtler aspects of the music.

4 Stevenson and Maloney had also starred in a previous Minghella short film, produced by Muppet creator Jim Henson, which bears striking thematic resemblances to *Truly, Madly, Deeply*. *Living With Dinosaurs* (1989) is about a young boy, Dom, with an unnatural fear of fish, though he lives in a fishing village. Dom is ashamed of his eccentric father [Maloney], a sculptor who specializes in fish imagery. Dom's mother [Stevenson] is a very busy physician undergoing a difficult pregnancy, and Dom is rabidly jealous of the new baby which they call 'the bulge'. The boy's only friend is a soft toy dinosaur called Dog [a Muppet operated and voiced movingly by Brian Henson], whom Dom takes with him everywhere, even to school in his knapsack. Dog comes to life when no one else is around and has a penchant for Elvis Presley songs. He gently guides the boy into a reconciliation with his father and an acceptance of his impending siblinghood, and Dom leaves Dog to protect his mother, who has nearly suffered a miscarriage. The film ends with Dog serenading 'the bulge' just as he had sung to Dom. The characters of Jamie and Dog, and their motivations, are almost identical: Jamie returns from the dead to help Nina come to terms with his death and a new life with Mark; Dog comes to life to help Dom come to terms with his father and the new baby, and to learn to make friends with other children. Dog and Jamie, significantly, both use music to carry out their tasks.

*Truly, Madly, Deeply* has frequently been tagged 'the thinking person's *Ghost*', but this is a deceptive analogy. Whereas in *Ghost* (Jerry Tucker), also released in 1990, the return of the dead lover is merely a plot twist, in *Truly, Madly, Deeply* it is fundamental. *Ghost* was a crime movie with a gimmick; *Truly, Madly, Deeply* is a film about the impact of death upon life. The story centres on Nina Mitchell (Stevenson), who works as a Spanish translator in a busy walk-in translation bureau in North London. When the film opens, Jamie (Rickman) has been dead for some months. Outwardly, Nina seems to be dealing with Jamie's sudden and freakish death from strep throat, but her boss, Sandy (Bill Paterson), and her sister, Claire (Deborah Findlay), sense that she is not. In her visits to her therapist we see how right they are. Nina is emotionally exhausted, constantly on the verge of tears; she senses Jamie's presence and, at times, even hears his voice. His mundane instructions ('brush your teeth', 'go to bed', 'lock the back door') comfort her. Sometimes he even speaks to her in Spanish. Funny thing, though – we are told – Jamie couldn't speak Spanish.

One evening, as Nina sits alone in her flat, missing him, Jamie reappears. He is Jamie as she remembers him, warm, funny, concerned (he reproves her for her overdue bills, the ramshackle flat, forgetting to lock the back door), and passionately involved in party politics (he still attends meetings). He is also still an irritating neatnik (he constantly tidies Nina's comfortably messy flat) and a hypochondriac (he is afraid if he catches a cold now, he will have it forever, so he is continually cranking the central heating up to tropical temperatures). After a blissful week spent ensconced in her flat, Jamie begins to gradually nudge Nina out of their safe, comfortable seclusion. She returns to work and she makes attempts at socializing, but at night she comes home to Jamie. Balancing the two worlds becomes difficult, however – Jamie has to hide whenever visitors come, so she avoids visitors; then he takes to bringing home friends from the other side to watch videos, and each time they come, there are more of them, threatening to fill the flat to overflowing. Nina is also drawn to Mark (Michael Maloney), an art therapist she meets in a cafe, but she obviously feels guilty about being 'unfaithful' to Jamie. Eventually, although she pleads with Jamie to stay, he leaves her once more. His mission has been accomplished – he has made Nina realize that, literally or figuratively, she cannot live with a ghost.<sup>4</sup>

The plot of the film is quite simple: girl loses boy, girl meets another boy, girl gets on with life. The richness of the narrative lies in the widely praised performances of the two leads and, on a more structural level, in its symbolism. In some senses, the symbolism *is* the narrative, for the plot – minimal as it is – unfolds in a series of vignettes largely constructed by symbolism.

Everything around Nina echoes her loss. Her flat is falling apart – the plumbing does not work, the kitchen cabinet doors do not close, the wallpaper is peeling, and now she has rats. Even the companions that surround her are dealing with losses of their own. Titus, the handyman, is lonely for his native Poland and fancies himself in love with Nina. Sandy's ex-wife Gabriela has custody of their son Charlie, and Charlie speaks only Spanish, one language that the multilingual Sandy does not speak; therefore, Sandy must rely upon Nina to translate Charlie's messages. Claire's husband Nick is always busy and is more interested in climbing Mount Everest than spending time with his family. Nina's student Maura works as a cleaner, although in Chile she was a filmmaker. Maura's friend Roberto was a doctor in El Salvador, but now works as a waiter. Even the pest-control man George is a widower.

Maura and Claire are closest to Nina, but they represent an anger and a loss that Nina has almost repressed. Both Maura and Claire are pregnant, but only once, during a wrenching visit to her therapist, does Nina reveal, to the audience if not to herself, her desire for a child. She vents her fury with women who have or are having children and with Jamie for leaving her (implicitly leaving her without a child). It is the birth of Maura's baby which causes the crisis in Nina's predicament. She comes to the realization that the ghostly Jamie will never be able to provide her with any kind of life – not for herself, hiding away from the world, and certainly not the child she so desperately wants.

These symbolic themes woven into the narrative are augmented by other, more contained, verbal and visual symbols. Clouds recur constantly as objects of contemplation: for Nina as she gazes out of windows throughout the film; as a subject for one of Maura's English lessons; as a naming-game that Jamie and Nina play in their idyll after his return. Traditionally associated with heaven, the clouds are on one level a symbol of Jamie's tenuous state of existence, but they also seem representative of his substantive presence. At the end of the scene in which Nina and Mark meet, the camera lingers on a puddle reflecting a grey, cloudy sky – a sky last seen as Jamie gazed thoughtfully out the window of Nina's flat. A set of cloud-shaped wind-chimes that he had given her become a point of contention as he discovers them during a bout of tidying and demands to know why they aren't hanging up; the chimes then follow Nina around her flat, in the kitchen, next to the bed, near her reading lamp, as if Jamie is moving them to remind her always of his presence. As we shall see,

clouds also play a prominent role in the lyrics of the popular songs that Jamie sings to Nina, extending the imagery to rain and, by association, to tears.

The clouds are frequently framed through a window, at Nina's flat or at the therapist's office, which connects with the most pervasive and emotionally significant visual symbol in the film. When Jamie first returns, he describes death as 'like being behind a glass wall while everyone else got on with missing me', and throughout the film, the image of characters isolated behind glass resonates with the division between the worlds of the living and the dead. At the beginning, before Jamie's return, Nina hangs out laundry in her back garden while Sandy, Titus, George and Keith the plumber wash the dishes; they watch her through the window as they discuss Jamie's death and Nina's subsequent devastation. Following their cloud-naming game, Jamie pauses thoughtfully before closing the window, shutting out the living world. When Claire comes to visit, Jamie and Nina hide from her, watching her through the window.

Nina's relationship with Mark can be traced through the symbolism of the glass wall. Her placement behind glass reveals her transition from isolation and mourning (her figurative death) towards Mark and life. She makes her first date with him through the window of a London bus, and she must open the window herself to speak to him; she must also strain as she reaches through the narrow window to give him her hand. Later, feeling stifled by her growing number of ghostly guests, Nina sits at her window, leaning out for cool air. The window is larger, and her body is freer to move through it. Indeed, she seems about to break away from the spectral invasion but, in the end, she chooses to close the window herself and turns back into the room with the ghosts. When Nina visits Mark at work, the glass walls of the building separate them, but finally, at the end of the film, she moves out into the world of the living. The ghosts watch Nina and Mark kiss from behind the windows of her flat.

Other symbolic structures in the film are less progressive and more symmetrical. Many moments early in the film are reflected in later episodes. Some balance in pairs. When Nina first meets Mark he is wearing jeans, a green henley shirt and navy overcoat – the same apparel favoured by Jamie. Jamie and Nina also share clothing, most significantly a pair of silver silk pajamas with an olive green cardigan that Nina wears before Jamie's return and that Jamie wears after he comes back. A set of mirrored scenes also structure Nina's relationship with Mark. After Nina and Mark make their first date, her bus pulls away, leaving Mark on the pavement with the group of mentally handicapped young adults with whom he works. She waves to him, and Mark's 'group' wave goodbye. Later, when Nina goes to meet Mark at work (her first active step in their relationship), they wave at one another from behind the building's glass walls. Again, the group clusters around Mark and joins in the waving, but this time the

action is welcoming. Other symbols are more subtly juxtaposed, as a visual image is verbalized, or action by one character is echoed by another – Nina’s and Jamie’s separate closing of the same window – or the same image is recontextualized. For instance, the appearance of a rat horrifies Nina at the beginning; when she sees it again at the end, it is a poignant confirmation that Jamie is indeed gone, for rats, he says, are terrified of ghosts.

This mirror-like construction may also be observed in the only two scenes in which Jamie, and not Nina, is the focus – the only two moments when he is alone, strengthening our sense of him as a ‘real’ ghost rather than a figment of Nina’s grieving imagination. The first occurs shortly after his return. Nina asks if she may kiss him. The kiss is filmed so that it is Jamie’s face that we see. He is totally lost in the kiss; Nina, however, is disturbed by his cold lips. When she leaves him to lock the back door, there is a rather long beat in which we observe Jamie huddled on the floor, thinking. He follows her outside to talk to her, the only point in the film when he openly explains his reasons for returning. Although he tells her that he could no longer bear her pain, he ends his speech with a joke, which defuses the intensity of the scene. This is a strategy he will also employ with the songs he sings.

At the opposite end of the story’s arc, Nina confronts Jamie about her need for a *life*. She refuses Jamie’s offer to leave her and go back with the ghosts; but when she leaves the flat to meet Mark, the ghosts return to Jamie, who is still (and again) sitting dejectedly on the floor. The ghosts ask ‘Is it time?’. With tears in his eyes, Jamie replies, ‘I think so, yes’. When Nina returns to the flat, Jamie is gone. Significantly, these two scenes which focus on Jamie are the two moments when his reasons for returning to Nina are most clear to the audience.

As may already be intimated from the above discussion, each of the three principal characters has a ‘chorus’ of supporting characters – Nina has a large one, composed of her sister, her therapist, her English language student, her boss, her handyman, her plumber and her pest controller; they are clearly the most differentiated, as she is the central character. Mark has his group. But Jamie’s chorus, his video-watching ghosts, is actually realized as an orchestra, connecting with the most important source of symbolism in the film, the music.

Music is central to Nina and Jamie’s lives and love; they share a passion for music as for each other – we learn that their first night together was spent playing duets. The different types of music in the film differ in the subtlety with which they are deployed as symbols, and the most obvious symbolism affects not only the audience, but the characters in the film. The diegetic songs are a covert message from Jamie to Nina; the audience may recognize that message before Nina

does, but she will eventually realize its meaning, even if the music must be stripped away first.

On the surface, these popular songs seem to function like the Hollywood musical number, a straightforward expression of the couple's joy at being reunited, as they are presented in a cluster soon after Jamie's return. The songs do not dilate time so much as compress it, revealing the depth and history of Nina and Jamie's relationship to the audience through the metaphor of musical performance.

Nina initiates only one of the songs, the first. It is Joni Mitchell's 'A Case of You'. The lyrics, describing someone so deeply in love that she could 'drink a case' of her lover, are clearly appropriate for Nina; as Jamie joins in, he seems more concerned with the musical aspects of the song. His strong sense of pitch steadies her rather wayward tuning, and the fact that they have sung together before, perhaps even this very song, is apparent from his cringe of familiarity when she erupts in a loud, off-key whoop. Their performance reflects their personal characteristics – Nina's free-spirited disarray against Jamie's pernickety dedication to order, as well as his higher sense of conventional musicality. Their eventual convergence towards a common key, despite these differences, and their amused acceptance of each other's musical foibles mirror their extra-musical relationship.

Jamie also sings fragments of Bob Dylan's 'Tangled Up in Blue' and Felice and Boudleaux Bryant's 'Raining in My Heart', made famous by Buddy Holly. The first few lines of 'Tangled Up in Blue' allude to his return out of concern, while 'Raining in My Heart' emphasizes the cloud imagery:

The sun is out, the sky is blue, there's not a cloud to spoil the view  
But it's raining, raining in my heart.  
The weatherman says clear today, he doesn't know you've gone away  
And it's raining, raining in my heart.<sup>5</sup>

Jamie's version, in fact, elides several different lines from the original, picking up the theme of the weatherman predicting a cloudless day, despite the inclement conditions in the singer's heart. Thus, he includes more direct reference to clouds and rain in the two lines performed, and he leaves the song on the brink of the bridge, which sets the words 'Oh, misery' to long, drawn-out, drooping phrases, long signifiers of anguish in western music. Although Jamie does not sing those lines, anyone who knows the song will probably fill in the blanks.<sup>6</sup> Despite the downbeat lyrics, the predominant impact of the scene is one of playfulness.

The same paradox is present in the most fully developed of the pop songs, Bob Crewe and Bob Gaudio's 'Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore'. The scene begins with a shot of Jamie through the window and, as he closes it, we hear a bowed cello introduction. A cut to the

<sup>5</sup> © 1959, House of Bryant Publications, USA. Acuff-Rose Music Ltd, London W1. Used by permission of Music Sales Ltd. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured.

<sup>6</sup> A similar, though even more oblique, reference may be found in 'A Case of You'. In an unsung verse of the song, the lyrics refer to the blue light of the television. One of the recurrent visual images in the film is the ghosts huddled around the television, illuminated by flickering blue light. The final scene, as they watch Nina and Mark, is backlit in blue, as if they have turned on the television in her flat.

- 7 Suspensions are pitches that begin as consonant notes in a chord, but as they are held and the notes of the chord move on, they create dissonances. These dissonances demand a resolution, by a movement (usually downward) to become consonant in another chord.

interior finds him on a piano stool, holding his cello like a guitar as he plucks out a bassline, and he sings as Nina dances around the flat, using various household items as percussion. She also interjects backing vocals on the words 'Jamie, baby', creating long, intense suspensions<sup>7</sup> against his melody. These suspensions are present in the popular Walker Brothers' version, but almost lost in that lush arrangement; in this minimal performance, everything is stripped away but the two voices and the bassline, focusing attention on these dissonances. As the song builds, instruments enter the soundtrack which are not present in the source-music setting of Nina's living room – first a tambourine, then strings and drums. Again, the lyrics speak of his awareness of her emotional state while also providing the image of clouds, rain and tears.

Loneliness is the coat you wear,  
A deep shade of blue is always there  
(chorus)

The sun ain't gonna shine anymore,  
The moon ain't gonna rise in the sky,  
The tears are always clouding your eyes,  
When you're without love (baby).

Emptiness is the place you're in,  
No more to lose and no more to win.  
(repeat chorus)<sup>8</sup>

- 8 'Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore'. Words and music by Bob Crewe and Bob Gaudio, © 1965, Saturday Music Inc./ Seasons Four Music Corp., USA. Reproduced by permission of EMI Music Publishing Ltd, London WC2H 0EA.
- 9 Richard Dyer, 'Entertainment and utopia', *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 17–34; reprinted from *Movie*, vol. 24 (Spring 1977).

Richard Dyer influentially described the musical number as a 'utopian' moment, a moment which presents to the audience a world which (momentarily) fills the gaps in their lives – most obviously the extravagant Busby Berkeley number of the 1930s offered an excess of luxury to a poverty-stricken Depression-era audience.<sup>9</sup> The 'numbers' in *Truly, Madly, Deeply* reverse this construction, presenting the audience with a view of the gap in Nina's life; in this luxurious display of their intimacy, we can understand the emptiness left in her by Jamie's absence. We are seeing glimpses of Nina's relationship with Jamie, at least as she remembers it; the numbers literally symbolize a time of harmony, and the effortlessness with which Nina and Jamie move in and out of music demonstrates their ease with using music as communication. But Nina is also the 'audience' for Jamie's performance: the musical number is a nostalgic utopia for her, the sugar-coating on the pill that he has returned to present to her – namely, that she must give him up.

All the pop songs Jamie sings amplify his indications that his return was motivated by his concern for Nina and his inability to bear her pain. Paradoxically, this motivation is both emphasized and masked by their performance. Jamie's concern over Nina's grieving is laid bare in lyrics directly addressing loneliness and pain that also connect with recurrent visual imagery of clouds. The long suspensions (heard and

unheard) add twinges of musical ‘pain’, and although it might be overreaching, it is tempting to point out the similarity of the narrative to the musical construction of a suspension. Nina was ‘consonant’, or content and harmonious, in her relationship with Jamie. After his death, she cannot let him go (sustaining their relationship) while the rest of the world moved on, leaving her ‘suspended’. The resolution is her move into another relationship with Mark.

Despite the encoded pain in the music and the sometimes quite obvious intention signalled by the lyrics, the exuberant performances and even the very familiarity of these songs partially submerge the message. Because they are so familiar, or at least of such a familiar type, we, including Nina, perhaps do not pay as much attention to the lyrics as to the musical interpretation. When Jamie feels Nina is ready to listen, he dispenses with music; he recites a poem that he has learned in Spanish (he had been having Spanish lessons while he was in limbo). It is Pablo Neruda’s ‘The Dead Woman’.

If you, my love, my beloved, if you have died  
The rain will fall on my soul, all day, all night.  
All the leaves will fall on my breast and  
My feet will want to march to where you are sleeping  
But I will go on living.<sup>10</sup>

Against the wishes of her heart, Nina understands that she must let Jamie go and ‘go on living.’

<sup>10</sup> Pablo Neruda, *The Captain's Verses* © 1972 Pablo Neruda and Donald D. Walsh. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Company.

Even while Nina is bashing out ‘Sun Ain’t Gonna Shine Anymore’ on the piano, a book with the name Bach in large letters is clearly visible on the music stand. It is a signal, if one were needed, that Bach’s music is a central part of Nina’s life – later, in her personality sketch of herself to Mark, she will declare her love of Bach as one of her defining qualities. While her relationship with Mark, the art therapist, is played out between and behind and through the visual symbol of the glass walls imposed by Jamie’s death, Nina’s relationship with Jamie, the musician, is traced through the music of J.S. Bach.

The union of Jamie the cellist and Nina the recreational pianist is symbolized by the Adagio of Bach’s Cello Sonata No. 3 in G Minor (BWV 1029). Three scenes, each at a key juncture of the plot, define their relationship through their instruments.

The first introduces Jamie as a memory. It occurs at the beginning of the film, at the moment when we realize that he is dead. In voiceover Nina describes her day and Jamie’s place in it while we see her going through the motions of everyday existence, half in a daze, guided by Jamie’s simple instructions. Also in voiceover, her therapist asks, ‘Nina – Jamie. When was it he died?’. Although we see Nina at her bathroom sink, obeying Jamie’s voice which tells her to brush her teeth, she reacts to the apparent disruption of the therapist’s

non-diegetic voice as if she has heard it. She sadly turns off the light, and the sudden black-out becomes the background to the opening credits. Jamie is seen in black-and-white against a blank dark background, playing the sonata. As he reaches up for a high position on the neck of the cello at the melodic peak of the melody, the image freezes and the camera pulls back to show a black-and-white publicity photo of Jamie, framed in ivy on Nina's bedroom wall. At the moment of this cinematic 'death', as he is trapped behind the glass wall of the picture frame, Nina fills in Jamie's missing 'voice' with her own. The camera moves through her flat, and eventually discovers her sitting at the piano, playing the accompaniment as she sings the cello part.

The second scene is Jamie's return. Nina sits at the piano, this time playing the melody and the bass line of the sonata. She breaks off, tries to continue, but breaks off again and sits helplessly at the piano. Very softly, the next note is heard on a cello, and Nina sits up, startled. The cello note grows louder and stronger, and she tentatively begins to play the accompaniment. As the cello and piano continue together, Nina laughs disbelievingly, the music flows more naturally, and the camera slowly pans around the piano to include the window, bright with late afternoon sun. Silhouetted against the sun, which suggestively backlights his blonde hair, is Jamie, playing his cello. The framing of Jamie over Nina's shoulder is a symbol that, like the sonata, reinforces the centrality of this scene by reflecting forward and backward in the film: in the previous scene, the cello was framed over Nina's shoulder while she wept over his absence; later in the film, this visual symbol is echoed verbally when Nina tells Jamie that she feels she carries him on her shoulder always.

The third scene is at the end of the film, when Nina realizes that Jamie has gone. Now Jamie sings without Nina's accompaniment. As Nina returns to her flat after having spent the night with Mark, the cello alone plays softly in the background with exaggerated reverberation, emphasizing a sense of emptiness. Nina vainly calls out for Jamie, and we see his photograph on the wall, surrounded by ivy no longer quite as green as it was at the beginning.

The connection of this Adagio with Jamie's presence is highlighted by the scene in which Nina *thinks* she sees him at the South Bank Centre. The music tells us that it is not Jamie. We hear Bach, but not the sonata. Instead, it is a Sarabande for solo cello. When Nina sees a fair-haired man in a green shirt and long navy coat playing the cello, her mind immediately interprets these familiar signs as 'Jamie', although as she draws closer, she sees it is someone else. The scene then changes to the exterior of her flat, and as Nina looks through the window, she sees Jamie playing the cello. He is playing the same Sarabande, and the music, unbroken, elides the two scenes, but the meaning seems to shift. At the Centre, it signals that the cellist is not Jamie – he is not, after all, playing 'their tune'; but the fact that Jamie

is playing the same piece as the one she heard suggests that he is still connected with her, that he knows what she has heard. Indeed, when she enters the flat, Nina tells Jamie she feels he is with her all day. However, the *solo* Sarabande also sends another signal about their relationship.

The relationship between the piano and the cello, like the relationship between Nina and Jamie, is transformed through the music of Bach. At the beginning of the film, we hear only the sonata; Nina is accompaniment to Jamie's voice, as her life has become subordinate to his memory. As Nina re-enters the living world and becomes more involved with Mark, she becomes increasingly detached from the sonata. Jamie plays either the solo sarabande, establishing him as an individual separate from Nina, or he plays Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G Major with his ghostly orchestra, reinforcing his membership in the 'choir invisible'. Nina acquires a new piece of music, Bach's Keyboard Concerto in G Minor (S 1058). The concerto is first heard when Nina spends the night with Mark, her first definitive step away from Jamie; it is heard again at the end when she goes away with Mark and the ghosts file across her living room to the window to watch them leave. The musical affect of the Andante of this concerto is one of resignation,<sup>11</sup> combining slow, stately block string chords with a winding, descending line on the piano. Nina's 'voice', the piano, is now in the foreground, supported by the chorus of strings that represents Jamie and his ghosts.

It is worth briefly noting the relationships between the four Bach works in the film. The two principle pieces, the sonata and the concerto are in G minor; the Brandenburg Concerto is in the parallel major, G major, meaning that the tonic, or home pitch, is the same. Though the Sarabande is in C minor, C is a very closely related key to G, and therefore there is a tonal coherence to the Bach elements of the score. Further, and most intriguingly, the sonata is generally considered an early 'draft' of the Brandenburg Concerto; indeed, the first movements of the two works are practically the same. The second movement of the sonata (the one used in the film) is, however, unique, as the Brandenburg has only a brief transition between its first and third movements. Therefore there is a very strong connection between the two pieces of music most closely associated with Jamie's state of 'death'; the sonata which symbolizes his passing, and the Brandenburg which symbolizes his belonging to the orchestra of ghosts.

<sup>11</sup> David Pearson, working on this film from the angle of its depiction of classical musicians, found this music 'excruciating' in its anempathetic response to Jamie's feelings, as Pearson interpreted the music's emotional affect as 'triumphant'. (David Pearson, MA Thesis, University of Southampton, 1996). This reading might at first seem contradictory to one of 'resignation', but the divergence can be explained. Although reading the music as 'triumphant' does not negate my functional interpretation of the scene, it does demonstrate how subjective and slippery musical semiotics can be. The slow, steady block chords are coded as 'dignified' (which works for resignation or triumph), but the melody has a complicated structure which can be read differently, depending upon which element you focus on. The notes that sound on the strong beats form a slow, steady, descending pattern, leading to an interpretation of resignation; the notes on the weak beats trace leaping arcs that may be read as 'triumphant', springing away from the weight of the descending line.

<sup>12</sup> Normally, the pitch heard when playing a string is the 'fundamental', or the pitch produced by the vibration of the entire string. The richness of the sound comes from the fact that the string also vibrates in smaller sections, providing a series of higher 'overtones'. Harmonics are produced by emphasizing these higher overtones and muting the fundamental and lower harmonics; the result is a thin, glassy sound. They are sounds without 'body' – rather like a ghost.

The identification of Nina with the piano and Jamie with strings is carried over into the underscore. Barrington Pheloung's music is better discussed in terms of timbre, or tone colour, than in terms of theme. There is nothing resembling a theme or melody in the underscore. String harmonics<sup>12</sup> in a middle register are sustained beneath isolated piano notes that cluster into fragmentary groupings which hardly

<sup>13</sup> Though the piano and strings are the predominant timbres, sometimes cor anglais or oboe takes over for either instrument. Both the cor anglais and oboe are instruments traditionally associated with loneliness because of their 'haunting', melancholy timbres.

<sup>14</sup> This texture and timbre is typical of Pheloung's style in general, although it is exaggerated in this instance. If this interpretation then seems to be overreaching, it is worth noting that Pheloung is most famous as the composer of the *Inspector Morse* television detective series, in which he interpolates Morse code messages, demonstrating his penchant for musical symbolism. *Inspector Morse* also constantly and prominently uses opera, both as an emotional release for its main character and as a source of code cracking. (My thanks to Victoria Vaughan for drawing my attention to the operatic conventions of *Inspector Morse*.)

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps a remnant of *Truly, Madly, Deeply*? The origin as a BBC television production lies in the fact that the music fades out before the end of the piece is reached, and indeed before the credits have finished rolling – a symbolic incompleteness, a space for a possible voiceover announcement, or simply a mistake at the mixing desk?

qualify as phrases<sup>13</sup> – they have no traditional musical grammar to give them coherence. The resultant sound is harmonically indecisive and rhythmically amorphous. The tentative, isolated piano notes reflect Nina's solitary existence, proceeding somewhat aimlessly; the 'melody' wanders without direction as does Nina. The string harmonics are 'insubstantial' and ghostly, but they support the piano, giving it at least a degree of harmonic stability, as Jamie's tooth-brushing and door-locking instructions support Nina and help her get through the day.<sup>14</sup>

This delicate, subtle underscore is the glue of the film; it appears almost solely to carry across scenes, attaching one to another over an edit, sometimes with the most tenuous of musical cues – some are only three or four notes. Relatively few scenes have underscoring throughout, and those that do have little dialogue. The scene which most prominently features the underscore is Jamie's return. Nina's realization of Jamie's presence occurs in silence, as they both have stopped playing the sonata; but when he pulls her up into his arms, he is accompanied by a brief moment of underscore – significantly, the only phrase of the underscore in the entire film that comes to a solid harmonic resolution. Jamie's physical presence is thus underlined by the substantial confirmation of the music.

After this early resolution, establishing that there could indeed be a resolution, the underscore is in a constant state of suspension throughout the body of the film. The final resolution of the suspension in the underscore comes not in the score itself, but – like Nina's narrative resolution – in the keyboard sonata. As in the Pheloung underscore, strings support a delicate piano melody, but now the melody (Nina's 'voice,' the piano) has developed a strong, coherent phrasing, and the strings have become more substantial and greater in number (as have Jamie's ghosts), proceeding in steady, pulsing block chords. Both melody and harmony are directed and purposeful.<sup>15</sup>

The impressionistic score may, on the surface, sound as far removed from Bach as it does from the pop songs, and as the Bach and pop songs do from each other, but on more abstract musical levels there are similarities. The underscore shares instrumental forces with the Bach, as has already been noted, and the timbral exposure of 'melody' can also be found in the *a cappella* rendering of the pop songs – the fragility of a single musical line, or voice, with little or no support. Pheloung's arrangement of the most fully realized of the pop songs, 'Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore', emphasizes an element that was almost inaudible in the familiar version – the sustained harmonic suspensions – and which is a feature of both the underscore and the Bach. The underscore thus bridges the diversity of the other musics in the film, functionally and stylistically.

Symbolically, however, the Bach is the bridge – or rather, in the context of the film, the glass wall – separating the world of the living

from the domain of the dead. Like Jamie, the Bach slides between the two, and between diegetic and non-diegetic, arcing across scenes and spaces. The two most prominent such arcs are, significantly, at times when Nina is most torn between Jamie and life. When she sees the cellist in the street, she is out with Mark; the music begins offscreen, distracting both her and the audience into seeking Jamie's presence. At first, she thinks the busker *is* Jamie, but even though he is not, we receive a visual explanation of the music onscreen. The music then continues non-diegetically as Nina is shown coming home alone, and, at the end of the scene, we are anchored to the music once more as she looks through the window to see Jamie playing. The second arc occurs during a visit to the therapist. Nina pretends to be sceptical about the possibility of the return of a loved one after death, and a full orchestral rendering of the third Brandenburg Concerto begins non-diegetically (apparently) as she wonders, if someone does come back – ‘Then what?’. A sudden cut shows Nina at the window, leaning out for a breeze, and the camera’s slow track down gradually reveals the ghost orchestra playing in her living room (no pun intended), finally anchoring the music in the diegesis. This scene, as discussed above, is a mirror of Jamie’s earlier closing of the window to perform ‘Sun Ain’t Gonna Shine Anymore’. The use of diegetic *and* non-diegetic instruments in that song – not to mention the bowed introduction, which Jamie could not possibly have performed, first because he is shown at the window, and second because even projecting backward from the edit, he has not had time to set aside his bow and put the cello on his lap – links that important song, like the Bach, with the suspension between this world and the next.

One question which arises inexorably is, as well-integrated and meaningful as this music is in this film, why *this* particular constellation of music? The answer seems to lie in character development, and particularly the development of Nina and Jamie as a couple. Music is the thing they most seem to share; almost their entire communication is built upon music, and they must, therefore, share a common vocabulary of music, the equivalent of a secret language of pet names. Their choices also reflect larger cultural connotations of the music.

While some might find it jarring to move from Bach to Buddy Holly, Jamie and Nina do so fluently and without self-consciousness. Throughout the film there is not so much a tension between pop culture and what might be regarded as ‘art’ culture, as a rejection of their difference. Jamie’s canny imitation of Bob Dylan’s and Buddy Holly’s idiosyncratic singing styles shows a high degree of pop cultural competency on the part of this professional cellist, but that is part of his character’s delineation. Jamie and Nina are baby boomers, so the early rock-and-roll of Holly, the socially conscious poetry of

Dylan, the confessional singer-songwriter style of Mitchell, and the polished, almost operatic pop of the Walker Brothers were all formative in the musical tastes of their generation. In fact, their familiarity (and ours) with this music is a shorthand method of reinforcing the minimal clues we have about what sort of people they are – bright, well-educated, politically and socially liberal.

While the pop songs encode generation and personality, the Bach is a class marker. Bach is one of the great masters of the musical canon, rivalled only by Beethoven. But while Beethoven's music is dynamic and energetic, culturally associated with struggle and the emergence of the individual from the Enlightenment to Romanticism, Bach's music is considered the height of intellectual rigour and spiritual devotion, far removed from such physical, human, *bodily* concerns. Although Jamie and Nina might come by Bach through their parents or through school, they do not treat his music with the awe-struck respect which they were probably taught. Bach is not just for intellectual contemplation of genius, nor even for spiritual enlightenment or religious devotion; it is a part of everyday living, breathing, loving and dancing.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Their egalitarian approach to music is also reflected in the videos chosen by the ghosts. Although all the films are classics, they range from 1940s romantic melodrama (*Brief Encounter*) to sixties rebellion (*Five Easy Pieces*), from Charlie Chaplin to Woody Allen, and *I Vitelloni* is replaced by *Pinocchio* without protest.

As an individual, Jamie is identified with music in a way we more commonly associate with female characters. He is not a traditional romantic hero, the composer or the virtuoso controlling the music, but a sensitive interpreter. Jamie's voice is his cello, as is represented in the deployment of the sonata and suggested by the timbral similarity between the instrument and the actor's bass-baritone. But further, Nina explicitly associates Jamie's cello with his body, despite its obviously feminine shape. When missing him, she cradles the cello in her arms, caressing its sides, and when irritated with him, she plucks its strings idly, then stops their vibration with the flat of her hand, effectively silencing his voice – yet another symbolic reflection.

The symbolism in *Truly, Madly, Deeply* is never so esoteric that the attentive viewer cannot divine it. The symbolism heightens the drama, but never becomes so obvious that it distracts from the story (with the possible exception of the moment when Nina almost hysterically declares that his cello *is* Jamie). The film is a delicate balance of fantasy and realism, and the symbolism is the fulcrum on which it balances.

The music in this film is connected with a network of verbal and visual imagery. But music is not merely another set of symbols; we could do without the rats or the clouds or perhaps even the glass walls, but extract the music, and we know significantly less about Nina and practically nothing about Jamie. Jamie is clearly the more musical of the two. Nina's musical expression is completely wrapped up in him. After her onscreen participation in the pop songs, about a third of the way through the film, her participation in music is restricted to listening as she begins to move away from Jamie; her musical action migrates definitively to the non-diegetic realm,

suspended in the underscore and resolved in the keyboard concerto. The music is crucial to our understanding of these characters and how they relate to one another.

*Truly, Madly, Deeply* is not a musical in ordinary terms, but neither would the music be recognized as a classical film score. The underscore is so transparent it is almost invisible (or rather inaudible), lightly eliding scenes and providing a symbolism that can only truly be decoded by those with musical knowledge – although whether they recognize it or not, the impact will be felt by anyone who has lived in contact with western music, since the symbolism plays on such basic musical grammar. More overt expression is taken over by music written for other purposes. Despite the protests of some film music composers, fans and scholars who feel that music must be written for a specific purpose to carry out its function adequately, this film reveals beautifully how pre-existing music can serve a story better than some Romantically conceived, organically composed film score. The narrative needs the weight of recognizable music, cultural baggage intact, to produce the impact that it does. This composite score rises above the level of motives and harmony, even rhythm and orchestration; it is composed of histories – musical, cultural, and personal – and thus has a resonance that no single composer could ever hope to achieve.

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## reports and debates

report:

### On dangerous ground: film studies in Australia

GEORGE KOUVAROS

1 Adrian Martin, 'S.O.S.', *Continuum*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1992), p. 6.

2 David Bordwell, *Making Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. x.

In his introduction to a special issue of *Continuum*, the Australian Journal of Media and Culture, Adrian Martin describes a feeling of estrangement in reading David Bordwell's *Making Meaning*, a sense of being not quite part of the institutional story of film studies that Bordwell constructs, 'even though', as Martin puts it, 'really, I somehow ought to be'.<sup>1</sup> The sense of estrangement that Martin describes is very easy to understand for those teaching and writing on film in Australia. *Making Meaning* is primarily an attack on what Bordwell sees as 'the conventionality of criticism':<sup>2</sup> the way so much writing on film is locked into a small handful of rhetorical manoeuvres that revolve around the inscription of implicit or symptomatic meanings. Bordwell argues that despite what appears to be a range of competing schools, arguments and theoretical assumptions and protocols, the activity of film analysis has often trod over the same interpretive ground. Bordwell's survey of the rhetoric and interpretive logic that underscores the major schools of film analysis is highly convincing. Where Bordwell is less convincing – and this is where Martin's sense of estrangement with the story told in *Making Meaning* begins to be felt – is in terms of the picture that it constructs of film studies as an institutional practice. Given that *Making Meaning* assumes that its readers have some familiarity with

the protocols and procedures of the institution of film studies, it is worth asking, along with Martin, how appropriate is its tale of institutional life.

My specific concern here is the relevance that Bordwell's understanding of the operation of the institution of film studies has for the actual working conditions and everyday pressures faced by film writers and scholars working in Australia. This exercise is useful as a way of highlighting certain factors impacting on film studies in this country; moreover it can also serve as a way of questioning whether certain institutional trends occurring in the major metropolitan centres can be seen as universally applicable. It should be stressed that these remarks are not intended to stand as a comprehensive survey of film studies in Australia. My aim rather is to present for consideration some issues that, for teachers and writers on film in this country, are an unavoidable part of the institutional landscape.

In Australia the history of the institutional study of film is so short, and the organizations and spaces which sustain this study so few, that it is impossible to ignore the fundamentally unstable nature of the terrain on which it operates. Film studies in Australian universities usually finds itself squeezed into the operations of more well-established academic disciplines such as English, Fine Arts, Sociology and History. Although tertiary film courses can be found throughout Australian universities, only one fully fledged cinema studies department exists in Australia, at La Trobe University in Melbourne. Film studies has survived under these conditions quite simply because of its ability to attract students, thereby serving to boost the financial viability of the schools and departments in which it operates. Needless to say, for some of the more traditional schools it has also provided an opportunity to present a more contemporary edge.

None of this, however, should lead us to think that the study of film has finally achieved some sort of academic respectability or that film graduates in this country can look forward to a reasonable chance of securing employment in academic departments. On the contrary, one of the reasons why Humanities departments are keen to teach film is because of the common belief that one does not actually need specialized knowledge to teach film; as a popular cultural text, film can be taught by anybody. The rise of cultural studies, with its focus on interdisciplinary practice rather than specialized text-based analysis, has also contributed to the undermining of film studies' claims for intellectual autonomy. This situation points to the relative immaturity of film studies as a specialized academic discipline. It also serves to deflate Bordwell's concern that academic film studies is continually returning to the same arguments, the same articles and the same canon of films.

Bordwell quite rightly points out that one of the central ways in which academic film studies sustains itself is through publication

output. In his survey of the expansion of academic film publishing, Bordwell argues that journals such as *Screen* in the UK, *Camera Obscura* and *Cinema Journal* in the USA 'selectively imitated academic discourse and influenced the emergence of academic schools of interpretation'.<sup>3</sup> In Australia the lack of academic film publications has produced outcomes not foreseen by Bordwell. At present there is only one theoretical journal with a specialist interest in film in Australia. Published out of Edith Cowan University in Western Australia, *Continuum* has managed to take up where the now defunct *Australian Journal of Screen Theory* left off, providing a forum for a wide range of theoretical debates related to film, television, cultural policy and the electronic image. Unfortunately, it remains something of a semi-regular publication with long delays between issues inevitably suggesting that extinction is not too far away.

In terms of magazine-type publications, *Cinema Papers* continues to publish. *Cinema Papers* is Australia's longest running film publication. Since undergoing a makeover in 1995, *Cinema Papers* concentrates largely on surveying and promoting the Australian film industry with a steady diet of interviews with local directors, production reports, industry surveys and the occasional historical piece on early Australian cinema. In the eyes of many involved in writing on film, *Cinema Papers* remains a curious publication. Trying to cater for both what it sees to be the needs of the film industry and a more general readership interested in critical writing on film, *Cinema Papers* is caught in a no-man's land between these two camps, without either the will or editorial drive to engage in any sort of critical dialogue with the Australian cinema. Sadly, the publication which most successfully covered both movements in the film industry and provided a place for sustained critical engagement on Australian and international cinema, *Filmnews*, folded in 1995.

Existing to one side of the theoretical/populist divide marked out by *Continuum* and *Cinema Papers* is the journal *Cantrill's Film Notes*. Published by the avant-garde filmmakers, Arthur and Corrine Cantrill, the focus of this journal is on providing a forum for avant-garde filmmakers to discuss their work. Although in the past *Cantrill's Film Notes* has published some important critical material, its target readership is essentially those with a vested interest in avant-garde film.

Apart from one or two other journal publications that pop up and disappear at regular intervals, that is the extent of film publishing in Australia. Although at first glance such a situation may sound bleak, anyone involved in film studies would also recognize that the conditions I have described are certainly not unique to Australia. Film publishing in English-speaking countries is, apart from a few stalwarts, undergoing quite difficult times. With Australia's relatively small population, and government agencies unwilling to subsidize

intellectual journals with small subscription bases, scholarly publications – whatever their focus – will always have a difficult time surviving in this country.

It is testimony to the survival skills of a small group of writers who have managed to relocate the study of film into publications devoted to art, literature and culture that serious writing on film in Australia has managed to survive. As Adrian Martin notes, the 'film culture' scene in Australia has fragmented enormously. 'Serious discussion of film happens (when it does happen)', Martin points out, 'these days across an incredibly dispersed network, and often in mangled, cryptic, necessarily compromised forms.'<sup>4</sup> As Martin goes on to argue, this fragmentation is not necessarily a bad thing; it often means that Australian film writing is characterized by a willingness to take on approaches and ideas coming from a range of different disciplines and areas of study.

Two locally published film books are particularly worthy of mention in this regard. *The Illusion of Life: Essays on Animation* and *Kiss Me Deadly*,<sup>5</sup> both published by the Power Institute of Fine Arts at Sydney University, are characterized by a willingness to explore and try on ideas that go beyond the very limited theoretical paradigms and manoeuvres that according to Bordwell typify the malaise of contemporary film studies. Both books situate the study of film not in a closed, highly regulated space producing predictable outcomes and conclusions, but at the crossroads of a variety of different approaches, points of interest and theoretical obsessions. While at times the end results of these investigations may be mixed, these two publications highlight the range of different rhetorical possibilities that characterize film studies in Australia.

The most significant factor responsible for questioning the institutional assumptions of film studies is not, however, the shortage of local publications devoted to film. A much more significant development concerns the impact the new media technologies will have on film's already shaky status as an independent object of study. In an issue of *Film Comment* published in 1988, Peter Wollen raises the prospect that 'film is about to become an art form of the past'.<sup>6</sup> Wollen claims that video, high definition television and computer-based image technologies will replace film, and with this development, 'Film studies will find itself absorbed into the study of the range of media using moving images'.<sup>7</sup> Wollen's remarks concerning the demise of film may seem somewhat pre-emptive. Samuel Weber has argued that the autonomy of any scientific or academic discipline has as its basis the presupposition of 'a field that is self-contained, subject to its own laws, to principles or rules that are in essence independent of all that surrounds them, of all they are not'.<sup>8</sup> Wollen's observations regarding the eventual merging of film studies into a broad-based study of moving images questions the possibility of such a presupposition; moreover it opens the door to a number of

<sup>4</sup> Martin, 'S.O.S.', p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Cholodenko (ed.), *The Illusion of Life: Essays on Animation* (Sydney: Power Publications, 1991). Laleen Jayamanne (ed.), *Kiss Me Deadly* (Sydney: Power Publications, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Thinking theory', *Film Comment* (August 1988), p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Weber, *Institution and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. x.

dilemmas that are currently vexing film scholars. If film studies abandons the supposition of an autonomous, self-contained object of study, what will be the institutional effects and consequences? Also, what models of interpretation should we be looking to as a way of dealing with these changes?

In Australia a number of important cultural institutions linked to film have positioned themselves to face the situation described by Wollen. In the late 1980s, the Creative Development Branch of the Australian Film Commission (AFC) wisely set up a New Image Research Program to fund works engaging with the new image technologies. Since then, the AFC has continued to devote money to organizations working in the new media. It also provides financial support to events such as the Australian International Video Symposium. In 1994 and 1995, the AFC staged two conferences on 'The Filmmaker and Multimedia'. Such events attest to the willingness of important film culture organizations such as the AFC to encourage discussion on the complex effects and implications of the new media technologies.

Late in its final term of office, the Keating Labour government released the *Creative Nation Commonwealth Cultural Policy* statement. The aim of this document is to address some of the complexities and developments taking place in the communications, culture and entertainment industries during the last two decades. While the boldness of this statement was welcomed by quite a few writers, it has also been criticized for adopting an uncritical view of the new media. Local writer John Conomos argues that the thrust of this document's approach is to embrace the new technologies 'as an opportunity to create new export cultural industries'.<sup>9</sup> One of the wisest things the government did, however, was to devote 5.2 million dollars of the eighty-four million dollars put aside for Creative Nation initiatives to the AFC in order to continue support of new media activity and research. What this funding has also done is to make new media an extremely attractive area of research for academics hoping to win some of the government funding made available for research into the possibilities of the new media. Given this level of government-sponsored activity in the area of new media, it is not surprising that for many local writers the terrain of film studies as it has been traditionally mapped out appears too narrow a space on which to be located.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> John Conomos, 'At the end of the century: *Creative Nation* and the new media arts', *Continuum*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1996), p. 118.

<sup>10</sup> At this stage, it remains to be seen what effects the change to a Liberal Party government will have on the initiatives that came out of the *Creative Nation* statement.

The picture that emerges of film studies in Australia, then, is of an unstable and shifting terrain that bears little resemblance to Bordwell's account of institutional life. To be part of the institution of film studies in this country demands a constant ability to adapt, change course and reposition one's self in spaces where film is at best only a passing concern. The only alternative to this is to face the prospect of being marginalized without the necessary skills to survive. It is the lack of any acknowledgment of these demands and pressures that makes

Bordwell's account of the institution of film studies in *Making Meaning* appear, in more than one sense, a decidedly academic exercise.

# reports

## Screen Studies Conference, Glasgow, 28–30 June 1996

Initially chagrined at being ‘nobbled’ by the conference organizers to write this report, I now concede the appropriateness of their choice since I had not attended such a conference for over a decade and might therefore have a sharper sense of the differences between ‘then’ and ‘now’.

The first thing that struck me was the difference in *tone*. By and large – and somewhat oddly given the institutional traumas most of the participants are experiencing in their places of work – the atmosphere nowadays is much more relaxed. People are more courteous to each other and there is none of the sense, always lurking in earlier days, that to utter an unpopular opinion was to risk a charge of heresy. No doubt this flows from the reduced claims now made for the work we do; it being now generally admitted, without resorting to political quietism, that the texts we write and the courses we run are unlikely, of themselves, to ignite the revolution or, if they do, the fuses will be longer and the bang closer to a whimper. This ‘pluralizing’ of the conference could be tracked in terms of the increasing number of theoretical points of reference. A decade or more ago it would have been Marx, Freud, Althusser, Lacan and, maybe, Gramsci. Today the names are much more ‘local’, extensive and, with few exceptions, contemporary: Irigaray, Jay, Pratt, de Lauretis, Huyssen, Deleuze, Anderson, Bakhtin, Benjamin. The other striking change was that, despite the insistence in former years on a text’s connection, relative or otherwise, with the wider social formation, an insistence often accompanied by a rabid *textuality*, there is today a much more relaxed, yet sophisticated sense of text/context interplay. This was particularly marked among a marvellous

phalanx of younger scholars, many of them working on television rather than film.

There were three plenary sessions, not all of them homologous with the diverse strands of the conference but, in a sense, marking the shifting paradigms we are living within. Politico-aesthetic identity, which would have been centre stage at some earlier conferences, was now mainly visible in the Queer Theory plenary. This strand was decidedly peculiar, having very much an ‘Emperor’s New Clothes’ feel to it. Paradoxically, it was among the best-prepared contributions of the conference, with the three presenters living and working in close proximity and therefore able to liaise and to have prepared an extensive bibliography covering all three contributions which were exceptionally lucid and well informed. The problem came in the discussion when, asked if her illustrative material (a ‘documentary’ about young, gay Latinos in Los Angeles) constituted a demonstrably separate queer aesthetic, the presenter had to concede that it did not. Like so many politico-aesthetic interventions before it (most notably the *Screen*-influenced British independent cinema of the 1970s), the claim made for queer documentary was that it deconstructs ‘dominant’ forms. This confirmed the direction of the discussion which revealed Queer Theory to be constructed round a series of absences and lacks, illustrating the wider danger of identity politics and aesthetics, the acceptance of otherness promulgated by the ‘enemy’, as in Senghorian *negritude*. Coffee-break gossip threw up a series of horror stories about students, attempting to deploy Queer Theory in their assignments, being reduced to silence and blank pages. This seems to confirm the growing realization that, all subjectivities being rhetorical, queer subjectivity is as inauthentic as the rest.

The second plenary was on Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain, marking the wider paradigm shift of interest from production to consumption, from makers to users, of the last few years. This was an interim report on an

extremely ambitious, two-year, Economic and Social Research Council-funded project located in the University of Glasgow's Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies. It sets out to construct an ethnohistory which goes beyond simple film-viewing to include, as the project says, 'space, place and memory'. The project is concerned with the films its respondents (1930s filmgoers of diverse ethnicities, classes and genders) saw, but equally with the whole phenomenon of *cinemagoing* (attachment to local cinemas, collecting of particular magazines and souvenirs, fascination with particular stars, and so on). As presented by its workers, the project is reassuringly well-informed and sophisticated about issues of method and the problems of oral history such as the nature of memory, the possibly intrusive role of the interviewer, and the forms of narrativization involved in recalling the past. This sophistication notwithstanding, and this is a fear which may be allayed when the final results are published, the 'memory texts' which are the central focus of interest may have quite a tangential relationship with the film texts which occasioned them. Is the answer to that point 'So what?'. That said, the manifest theoretical sophistication of the project and its scale are pathbreaking in relation to film culture and will set the highest scholarly standards for future work in this area.

The third plenary, on Television Drama, while not marking a vast paradigm shift, nevertheless constituted a plea for certain shifts of emphasis: from film to television; from 'everyday' television such as soaps and game shows to 'quality' television such as costume drama and, within that, literary adaptation; from phenomenological insight to textual analysis. The impulses underlying this called-for shift of emphasis include the centrality of 'quality television' as a term in the debate surrounding deregulation, and the unrefined, blunt instrument character of the terms most often used to describe costume

drama – terms such as 'heritage' and 'nostalgia'. Among the problems involved in the adaptation of literary classics for television is the loss of the overarching, frequently ironic, authorial discourse (so brilliantly reformulated in Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*). This means that complexity and irony require to be reinstated at the level of the mise-en-scene, possibly – it was provocatively suggested – at the level of the actor. The overall aim of this shift of emphasis to quality literary adaptation is, precisely, to wrench that sector away from notions of heritage and nostalgia and foreground the kind of literary adaptation (Derek Jarman's *Edward II* was offered as exemplar) which will 'rediscover the past as a different country', as the presentation put it.

Outside of the three plenaries, every participant will have experienced the conference differently with three sessions running simultaneously. That said, however, certain recurrences were discernible. Although the politico-aesthetic identity baton had been taken up primarily in the Queer Theory intervention, there continued to be (in addition to fainter ripples of earlier conference concerns such as Early Cinema and Black Cinema) a powerful, residual feminist strain in several papers, often cashed in relation to the work of particular women filmmakers (as in the papers dealing with the films of Jane Campion, Marleen Gorris, Sally Potter and Josiane Balasko), although the same papers very often displayed the same shift towards consumption which had been writ large in the 1930s Film Culture Plenary, deploying terms such as 'female spectatorship' and 'ethnography' and 'memory text'.

'Memory' was also a key term in another important strand of the conference, although here what was being addressed was public rather than private memory. Two papers oscillated round the return to the 1960s in (relatively) recent American films such as *Forrest Gump* and *JFK*, and a third came at the use of documentary footage in these films

by way of the implications of that footage's multiple reworkings in the new technologies, the Zapruder footage of the Kennedy assassination being the most reworked.

Inescapably, when questions of memory are raised, there was a paper on the Holocaust as filtered through *Schindler's List*. It was the tension between public memory and 'survivor' memory – the term 'survivor' being used, to some raised eyebrows, in the 1930s Film Culture Project – which most sharply illustrated the overlapping concerns of these two areas of the conference.

Despite the claim in the third plenary that television is the neglected bastard child of screen studies, it was well represented at the conference with papers on Dennis Potter's *Karaoke* and *Cold Lazarus*; on the historically important BBC executive Grace Wyndham Goldie; and on the police series *Between the Lines*. It was particularly in these papers – though true of the conference as a whole – that one saw the fruit born of the pain of the heavily theoretical 1970s conferences; a relaxed, historically and theoretically informed empiricism.

One of the pleasures of conferences is attempting to spot emergent areas of concern. The third plenary's foregrounding of performativity and, in particular, the actor, may signal just such an ascendant interest, but what was truly surprising was the large number of papers (no fewer than six) concerned with sound/music, from its increasing importance in video installations in galleries, through an attempt further to theorize and categorize it, to demonstrations of its hitherto unrecognized complexity in classical narrative cinema and its ethnicizing in *Odd Man Out*. I wonder if this renewed interest in the soundtrack is in any way connected with the recent translation from the French of Michel Chion's *Audio-Vision*, a frequent point of reference in discussion. It was the papers in this area (and in the history/memory strand) which produced in me that response we all hope for at conferences, to

have your mind race with connections between what you already know and what the papers tell you.

There is something we all know but repress after every conference. That is, that the practice of *reading* a paper aloud is a barbarous, anti-pedagogical activity which we ought to have abandoned a long time ago. I cannot have been the only one at the conference to have sat stunned rather than stimulated during the reading of a potentially interesting paper while the shortness of time, the acoustics and the ethnic/national/gender vagaries of the human voice conspired to inhibit understanding. My plea is simple. Let us adopt as standard operating practice at conferences that 'performers' may distribute a written paper in whatever form they choose (the Queer Theory group's bibliography was much appreciated) but that their spoken presentation should consist of the extrapolation of no more than six key points of an argument with plenty of time left for clarification and discussion.

It's good to be back!

*Colin McArthur*

#### **The Third Biennale of Arab Cinemas, Paris, 21–29 June 1996**

The films selected for the Third Biennale of Arab Cinemas show the extent to which Arab filmmaking has been transformed in recent years. When, in 1990, the Arab review *al-Yom Assabeh* asked critics and filmmakers to choose the ten best Arab films of all time, all but one (Youssef Chahine's *Cairo Station/Bâb al-hadid* [1958]) were the product of state-run national production organizations. In 1996, only the Syrian national organization is represented – with the Moscow-trained Riad Chaya's *Al-Leya* (1995). Elsewhere – even in Egypt – private enterprise rules. Not surprisingly, the topic for the Biennale's major debate was 'Public Sector, Private Sector:

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## What Future for Arab Cinema?

While the shift to the private sector may have potential advantages for an independently-minded director, a second shift can only be threatening. The Third Biennale reveals the extent to which Arab filmmaking has now become filmmaking in exile. For example, the competition for best short fiction film (the form in which potential feature filmmakers have traditionally begun their career) contained works by young filmmakers from seven Arab countries. But all the works included – except the Egyptian entries – were produced in Europe: in France, Belgium, Norway or Switzerland.

The question of what constitutes an Arab film was posed most forcefully by Rachid Bouchareb's *Living Dust/Poussières de Vie* (1995), which was given a gala screening. This is clearly a work of distinction – nominated in the 'best foreign film' category for the 1996 Hollywood Oscars – but is it in any sense meaningful to talk of it as an Arab film? The director, it is true, is of Algerian descent, but he was born in France, the film's funding is French (with European script development funding), it was shot in Malaysia and deals with the fate of Vietnamese children abandoned by their US soldier fathers after the fall of Saigon in 1975.

These two shifts – in production context and national identity – combined with a change in technology (most of the documentaries are now shot on Beta SP video) have transformed the definition of Arab filmmaking. The poles of past and present could not have been clearer at the Biennale. At one extreme, there were the Egyptian musical films of the 1940s and 1950s, included in a homage to the singing star Leila Mourad who died earlier this year, and – in a very different register – the little 35mm cartoon stories (featuring Mish Mish Effendi) and animated publicity shorts (for Sunlight Soap, Vim and the Royal Automobile Club) shot in the same period by the Frenkel Brothers in their Cairo studio. At the other extreme, the forty or so films of all

kinds made by a vibrant new generation of Lebanese filmmakers, young men and women mostly born in the 1960s and 1970s, who – from a total diversity of background and standpoint – seek (as Randal Chahal-Sabbag puts it) to discover 'the logic of the pain' of the Lebanese experience.

Chahal-Sabbag won the special jury prize in the documentary category with her own sixty-minute video documentary, *Our Feckless Wars* (1995), in which she questions members of her own family. How to make sense of a war in which 200,000 people died, but where a ceasefire could be arranged just to let a German film crew shoot a *fictional* tale of the fighting? Or when it is safer to be captured by the 'enemy' (the Syrians or Israelis) than by those who yesterday were your allies?

The feature films shown in competition were further evidence – if such is needed – that one must talk of Arab cinemas, rather than of a single Arab entity. Egyptian cinema has an impressive history. The prestige of the pioneers such as Mohamed Bayoumi and, in the 1930s, Kamal Selim, is uncontested, as is the achievement of the masters of the 'classic' era: Salah Abou Seif (who died during the course of the Biennale, on 22 June), Youssef Chahine, Tewfik Saleh. The originality and interest of the generation which attempted a 'new Egyptian cinema' from the 1980s is, however, much more in question. But this year – in Paris at least – there could be no doubt about their impact.

The IMA grand prix (together with the best actress award) was won by *A Hot Night* (1994), the fifteenth and last film made by Atef al-Tayeb before his death, after a heart operation, at the age of forty-seven in 1995. *A Hot Night* is a worthy finale to a distinguished career. It has all the qualities characteristic of the new Egyptian cinema: a concern with the financial and emotional problems of little people who are the mercy of the system, a complicated two-hour plot well shaped to provide (in the end) the obligatory happy ending, a space for the players to display their

talents – here, especially, Nour al-Chérif, making his eighth appearance in an al-Tayeb film.

The public's prizes for long and short fictional films also went to Egyptian works. The feature-length *Life, My Passion* (1995), which swept the board with eight awards at the recent Egyptian national festival, was directed by a newcomer, Magdi Ahmed Ali. It is very much in the tradition of the 1980s new Egyptian cinema, telling the stories of three women friends, all over the age of thirty, who spend their lives looking for a husband. The form, as with Atef al-Tayeb, involves complicated plotting, a huge degree of contrivance, brash extrovert acting and a keen awareness of what will involve an audience. The award-winning short, *An Ordinary Sunday* (1995) by Saad al-Hendawi, clearly follows in this tradition, though more soberly. The strength of the Egyptian tradition is clear: all three directors (born, respectively, in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s) attended courses at the Film Institute in Cairo (which between 1963 and 1995 trained 1,530 film professionals, including 249 potential directors). They all followed the conventional apprenticeship as assistant directors and makers of short films, and their work shows a keen awareness of the Egyptian domestic market from which other Arab films have always been rigorously excluded.

Such a consistent pattern is not apparent elsewhere in the Arab world. North African filmmaking, for example, which was represented by five films, offers a very different image and an alternative set of priorities. Here the filmmakers whose work, it is fair to assume, will be excluded from the Egyptian market, look instead to Europe (where all of them were trained).

The Moroccan Jillali Ferhati's *Make-believe Horses* (1995) focuses on an ill-matched group of individuals, all of whom dream of going abroad: the gambler Mohamed to see a horse race, Ali to have an operation to restore his sight, Fatima to join her mother. This is a

suffocating world, reminiscent in some ways of French 1930s poetic realism: the enigmatic blind man, a setting of bleak rain-swept streets, characters whose dreams are blocked, escape which seems just at arm's length but can never in fact be reached, and the inevitable ending in death.

Ferid Boughedir's *One Summer at La Goulette* (1996), which won the special jury prize for fiction, also looks back to the past, in this case to the Tunisian port-resort of La Goulette in the 1960s. The film has a storyline which would better sustain a soap opera than a ninety-minute narrative: three girls who are close friends (the Christian Tina, the Jewish Gigi and the Muslim Meriem) play a game of swapping their (equally religiously variegated) boyfriends, and are caught by their parents. Can the close life-long friendships of their fathers survive? *One Summer at La Goulette* is an uneven and untidily constructed film, complete with touches of nudity which will doubtless ensure its success with Tunisian audiences. Its plea for the tolerance which marked Boughedir's own childhood in Tunis is admirably stated.

Nothing could be further in tone or texture from the nostalgia of Boughedir's film than *Bye Bye* (1995), shot in Marseilles by the principal Tunisian-born director living in exile, Karim Dridi. The film paints a vivid picture of émigré life in the slums around the port: the overcrowding at home paralleled by the close intermingling in the nearby streets, where sex, violence, vandalism and racism are all turned inwards. Dridi's view of urban life is harsh and uncompromising, and he keeps his (often hand-held) camera close in to the action, creating a powerful dramatic effect.

Algeria was represented by the Belgian-trained Belkacem Hadjadj's first feature, *Machaho/Once Upon a Time*... (1995). This is the first Algerian feature to be released in which the characters speak the Berber language, which was banned from the screen until the recent political upheavals, so that the production of *Machaho* is in itself a

political act. Hadjadj, who plays the lead himself, takes the opportunity to offer a critical examination of traditional attitudes and beliefs, particularly the male concept of honour. Cleanly shot in the Kabyle mountains and with an emphatic musical score, the film traces a simple narrative trajectory leading inexorably to confrontation and death.

Otherwise Algeria was represented by its filmmakers working abroad: those who have established themselves in France only during the last few years (such as Merzak Allouache, born in Algiers in 1944); those who came to France in their twenties (such as Abdelkarim Bahloul, born in Rebahia, Algeria, in 1950); and those who were born in France of Algerian descent (such as Rachid Bouchareb, born in 1953).

Allouache's sixth feature in a twenty-year career of feature film production is *Hello, Cousin!* (1996). Told with the director's customary humour, this is the story of two cousins, Mok, a second generation immigrant, and his cousin Alilo, newly arrived from Algiers. The film makes clear the vast differences in life-style between Paris and contemporary Algeria, and its conclusion is

ironic: while Alilo misses his plane back to Algiers, Mok is bundled off there, expelled from France for undesirable activities.

In Abdelkarim Bahloul's *The Hamlet Sisters* (1996), which deservedly won the European Commission prize, all the main characters have links with the Maghreb, but the dichotomy between France and Algeria is not the key focus of attention. The film tells the story of two adolescent girls who are trapped in Paris when their escort is taken ill and all the trains have stopped. They are befriended by Allel, an elderly Algerian who comes briefly to stand in for their absent father. This meeting is itself only part of a general pattern of lives crossing and re-crossing in nighttime Paris, with the film unfolding as both hymn to the city and plea for tolerance and understanding.

Although this Biennale failed to come up with a real masterpiece, the wide array of films was impressive, pointing to the continued vitality – despite the production problems and inner divisions – of Arab filmmaking in the mid 1990s.

*Roy Armes*

## reviews

### review:

Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckrey (eds), *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1994, 361pp.

**ROGER SILVERSTONE**

Humanity is in doubt. This sentence can be read, and indeed this collection implies that it must be read, in two ways. The first is in the sense that technology – information technology and biological technology – are changing what it is to be human. The second is in the sense that doubt is an essential component of what it is to be human. From doubt springs critique. From and through critique there emerges, must emerge, a challenge to the ingrained and institutionalized disavowals that mark our relationships to new technologies, as well as a challenge to the disorientations and confusions that are part of our entry into late twentieth-century techno-culture.

We are strangers in a foreign land of bits and bites, nano-seconds, genes and genomes, codes and cyborgs; of virtual realities and real virtualities. As strangers we have no language to describe what we see; and what we see is not what is there or what we know. What we take for granted in the face-to-face interactions of everyday life, what we know about the limits of our material and bodily and symbolic world, our capacity to manage, to plan and to remember, all of these things are – it would seem – precariously balanced on the edge of the precipice of a New World Order, in which we stand pathetically uninformed, technologically challenged, culturally confused. We are blinded by the competing rhetorics of science, industry and advertising, buffeted by waves of panic and desire, adrift on a consuming sea, a sea of consumption.

These metaphors and other metaphors like them are easy. They are the virtual reality within and through which some sense of this New World Order is being offered, and many of the contributors to this collection rarely leave the metaphoric, offering words instead of insights and fantasies instead of arguments, replicating through their own discourse the splitting they so complain about in others, in popular culture and above all in the endless simulation – the new imperialism – which simultaneously both reveals, disguises and denies the realities of pre-millennial life. Other contributors seem to have a firmer grasp both of the difficulties and the contradictions of what is supposedly so new, and what unites these essays, above all, is a sense of a political reality which defines and informs both the technological and the cultural and which must in its turn be confronted, politically. But what kind of politics is appropriate?

Such a question has to struggle not just with conventional issues of public and private interests, of representation both in image and in action, and with accountability and responsibility, but with a range of imponderables that are, arguably and plausibly, the direct result of the intravenous injection of new technologies into the social and cultural bloodstream. At the core of these concerns, of course, is the issue of control, and the debates, well illustrated here, are articulated through a number of familiar positions: a stress on the industrial (military-industrial, multi-national, imperialist) construction and control of the technologies themselves; a stress on a kind of technological determinism which identifies in the disposition of technologies, both info- and bio-, a fundamental and consequential undermining and redefinition of culture; and the presentation of the more or less utopian belief in technologies' potential for social liberation and for the personal manumission from enslavement by post-Enlightenment rationality.

The paradoxes are legion and they are not easy to resolve, though Langdon Winner's sharp piece in this collection identifies three: the paradox of intelligence (in which as computers get cleverer we seem to be getting more stupid); the paradox of lifespace (in which computers are meant to release more leisure, creativity and freedom but we seem to have less and less unindentured time); and the paradox of electronic democracy (in which the enhanced democratic potential of the information society seems to be accompanied by increasing tele-lethargy). It can be said that the reason for this difficulty, at least for most of us, is our present position in the eye of the storm, at the heart of the revolution, in which we are inevitably and necessarily blinded – perhaps even deliberately blinded if Herbert Schiller is to be believed – by the competing urban legends that circulate both globally and locally: tales of viruses infecting both humans and computers, of genetic engineering and monstrous births, of wars represented but not really fought, tales of magic and mystery in virtual and scientific and consumer space. It is all positively mediaeval, a seductive

enchantment that is arguably, however, neither innocent nor malicious, neither simply white nor black. Yet there is no escape as media and information technologies converge with bio-technologies, a convergence that involves the juxtaposition of, and collusion between, the new hardware of the reconstituted body and the software of the extended and liberated mind.

*Culture on the Brink* is the product of a conference held in New York in 1992. It offers a wide-ranging review of the cultural implications of rapid technological change, bringing together, unusually and suggestively, pieces that address both biology and information. The contributors, too, bring a wide range of perspectives and experiences, from the scholarly to the practical, from the philosophical to the aesthetic. Their shared agenda is to offer a critical engagement with both the received wisdoms and the unchallenged assumptions that inform much of the discussion of the implications of technical change for culture. It is an agenda which is easier to set than to realize.

Timothy Druckrey's introduction gives some clues as to why this is. In part it is a matter of language and discourse. It is also a matter, ironically, of the location and the analysis of the real. Druckrey's argument begins with a characterization of the dramatic consequences of technological change, consequences that involve, in his words, both a triumph over, and a subsumption of, experience, whose cause is the simultaneous expansive regulation of the external world and the contraction and increasing penetration of the internal world, and whose consequence is both the denial of the individual and the erosive mystification of reason. In this characterization technologies and fictions converge, bodies and machines converge, realities and fantasies, nature and culture, converge. Technologies are indeed the *deus ex machina* of the current age and perhaps it was ever, and indeed tautologically, so. Yet their revolutionary significance is assumed not demonstrated and the complexities of uneven, stuttering, contradictory, social and technical change are put to one side. It is a significant omission for it licenses his contributors to buy the rhetoric before they challenge it, and for the most part this involves ahistorical and unsociological approaches that are not without their insights, but which leave the reader – at least they leave me – somewhat less than convinced.

This is not consistently the case however, for example Stanley Aronowitz's careful argument shows how computing and computer systems both embody the culture of global capitalism and deny and destroy the culture of the workforce, undermining their sociability (at least this was still granted by Marx in his analysis of capitalist relations of production who saw in them the potential for unionization and the eventual overthrow of the capitalist system) and reducing their competence. Acknowledging, but significantly discounting, the cyborgian potential in human-machine interaction (a potential for

more intense and more creative communication) he stresses, as do other contributors, the panopticon rather than the interaction, and mourns the computer-generated passing of the kinds of skills that involve the 'close co-ordination of feeling and reason, of intuition and calculation'.

The cyborg is, however, a powerful metaphor. It is indeed possible to suggest that it has become the defining metaphor of our age, condensing as it does body and mind, nature and culture, human and machine, the biological and the technological. Donna Haraway's seminal essay informs the thought behind a number of contributions to this collection, though many of them ignore the specifically feminist critique that Haraway originally intended. It is the idea of convergent hybridity that is infinitely suggestive.

How important now is the body, displacing identity and subjectivity as the focus of concern both in these texts and indeed elsewhere. The body ageing in Kathleen Woodward's critique of the discourses of scientific and popular culture, the body's prosthetics in Elaine Scarry's analysis of the literal and symbolic animation of artificial limbs and dolls, the absence of the female body in AIDS discourses in Paula Treichler's insightful study, the body as the site of scientific description and experimentation in Joan H. Marks's and R. C. Lewontin's careful appreciation of the pros and cons of the Human Genome Project, and the body consuming in Margaret Morse's quixotic investigation into the culinary habits of the cyborg, an investigation that includes fatness, smart drugs and smart performances, strategies all for managing, negating, repudiating and displaying the cyborg self, bodily ingesting and excreting in a hyper-realized world. Bodies and food – if they are smart – are seen by Morse to occupy the non-spaces between representation and reality: both, in a sense, disembodied.

And as Andrew Ross argues in the final piece in the book, smartness itself has both a new and a particular significance, not intelligent, but sharp, efficient, user-friendly and obedient. A smart card, smart drugs, smart machines. But what, Ross asks, is smart politics? Unfortunately there is not much of an answer. Ross seems to suggest that smartness consists in recognizing that some techno-political ideas are too smart for their (our) own good, and smart politics consists in bringing this to everyone's attention.

Not here perhaps, but elsewhere. The politics of the New World Order will be fought out on the global television screen, that much is certain. Jean Baudrillard's excursion into the Gulf War has provided an opportunity to explore more thoroughly the simulation that lies at the core of the contemporary, the mask and masquerade, where games and war lose their distinctiveness in the daily performance of distant and anaesthetized nightmares. Behind the screen, what? Kevin Robins reminds us in this volume that lives are lost, buildings are destroyed and lies are told, yet why do we need still to be told this? James Der

Derian writes of the Gulf War Syndrome in which 'the construction and destruction of the enemy other is measured in time not territory; prosecuted in the field of perception, not politics; authenticated by technical reproduction, not material referents; and played out in the method and metaphor of gaming, not the history and horror of warring' (p. 275), yet is quite defeated when it comes to offering a way through the simulated otherness of contemporary mediated globalism.

Yet the simulation can also be seen for what it is rather than what it is not, what it reveals rather than what it hides; that it serves interests, familiar interests, and that our critiques can begin to understand it, psychoanalytically (as Robins is inclined to), aesthetically (in the pieces by Laurie Anderson, Billy Klüver and Tricia Rose), but above all politically and sociologically.

The invisibility of technology in everyday life and, above all, the invisibility of the processes through which technology comes to be produced and consumed must be addressed if a viable politics is to emerge. Gary Chapman and Les Levidow understand this well and, together with Winner and Aronowitz, confront the political realities that lie not far below the surface of the virtual spaces and images that in their turn confront us on a daily basis. What is invisible is not the technology but the social and political relations in which it is inscribed and which in turn claim a further inscription. At the same time those social and political relations need to be understood for what they are, neither singular nor determining, neither uniform nor uncontradictory. Indeed there are worlds and peoples where new technologies will only be experienced in their absence, and yet others where their potential will be resisted, transformed or transcended. This complexity has to be taken into account if we are to move beyond the platitudes of the utopian and dystopian, and if we are to make some progress both in understanding and controlling the rapid pace of technological change. *Culture on the Brink* enables these debates to be identified and the issues to be discussed. At stake, in the double sense in which I began this review, is, indeed, our humanity.

review:

**Stephen Kline, *Out of the Garden: Toys and Children's Culture in the Age of TV Marketing*. London: Verso, 1993, 406pp.**

**David Buckingham, *Moving Images: Understanding Children's Emotional Responses to Television*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986, 325pp.**

#### DAVID OSWELL

*The secret of success lies in the head of an eight year old child. That is the eternal paradox of the toy industry. Adults running multimillion-dollar toy companies are always trying to climb back inside that eight year old head.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Landensohn Stern and Schoenhaus, *Toyland: the High-Stakes Game of the Toy Industry* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1990), p. 23, quoted in Kline, *Out of the Garden*, p. 138.

The desire to know the child – to imagine their thoughts, know their feelings and actions – is not just the vocation of toy manufacturers, but has also been the driving force of much academic research in the area of children and television. Although academics have not fallen foul of wanting to *act* like a child – so vividly encapsulated in the hiring of the child-made-adult character (Tom Hanks) as a toy industry executive in the movie blockbuster *Big* (Penny Marshall, 1988) – they have consistently tried to understand how their minds work. To this extent, the discipline of psychology has provided the dominant framework for understanding young people's use and interpretation of television and the effect that such a medium has on that sector of the population. The primary concern within psychology has been to assess the impact of television upon the cognitive dispositions and capacities of young people divided up and classified according to their developmental stage. Both the books reviewed here, in their very

<sup>2</sup> Other works would include: Cary Bazalgette and David Buckingham (eds), *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences* (London: British Film Institute, 1995); David Buckingham (ed.), *Reading Audiences: Young People and the Media* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in the Movies, Television, and Video Games: from Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993).

different ways, attempt to redefine the *problem* of children and television and begin to locate *questions* about children's media cultures more firmly within a media and cultural studies agenda.<sup>2</sup>

Stephen Kline, in his analysis of the unholy alliance between toy manufacturers, marketing and television, takes an approach which is reminiscent of earlier critiques of the culture industries. The importance of analysing children's media cultures in terms of the industries which target young people as consumers cannot be overemphasized. At the level of common sense and of policy, poorly substantiated arguments about the impact of commerce and of the market are regularly reproduced. Parents in school corridors and experts in the press often regurgitate, as a form of collective catharsis, the litany of horrors about programme-length commercials such as *My Little Pony*, *Thundercats* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. And yet there has been little research into the industries that produce the products which children enjoy and play with in playgrounds and sitting rooms across the globe. Kline's book is a welcome exception. He provides a tightly argued and detailed account of the historical and social emergence of the role of marketing in children's lives and of the immense economic power the cultural industries wield.

Although his main focus concerns the dominant role of *television* advertising and marketing in children's cultures in the postwar period, he starts his historical narrative by looking at book publishing in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at the rise of children's comics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and at the growth of films for children in the 1920s. His narrative takes the reader across continents from children's books in Victorian Britain to Disney's vast array of media related products in the USA. Such material has been covered before, but the strength of Kline's argument lies in the way he majestically crosses these different media and geographical domains and in his use of history to identify significant points of change such as the introduction of television and its complex relationship with marketing and the toy industries. In this context, the difference between Peter Pan and G.I. Joe is clearly visible. The choice between a nostalgic version of children's fiction and merchandising-led animation in the moral, psychological and educational development of our children could not have been made clearer.

Kline writes well. He willingly sacrifices 'long reviews of scientific studies' for rhetorical and 'theoretical elegance' (p. ix). Such a sacrifice pays rich dividends. Enjoyable to read and persuasively argued, the book draws you into Kline's anxieties about children's lives in contemporary capitalism. It is a book I would recommend to my mum as much as to my students and colleagues. And yet for all the hard sell, certain questions remain unanswered. To what extent, for

example, does his vision of the big picture and the game of western capitalism ignore the specificities of more localized contexts? Some way through the book, Kline talks about the 'enormous growth' of the US toy market from two billion dollars in the mid 1970s to over twelve billion in 1986. He argues that this growth is the result of new television services and technologies, deregulation and increased competition. These are changes which have had an impact on most western capitalist democracies and their media infrastructures. And yet he continues by stating that 'the rise in character marketing has all but eliminated images of real children playing in the normal course of their lives – in dramas or narratives about and for the young' (p. 141). I could not help thinking at this point that, although this is obviously a major concern for parents, public service children's broadcasters and others, children's terrestrial television in the UK has not, as yet, been overrun with merchandising-led animation. ITV, BBC and Channel Four all produce innovative dramas, documentaries and current affairs programmes which involve and represent ordinary children. Thus despite the powerful force of Kline's argument, a coda should be put in place in order to qualify the inevitability of his globalizing logic.

Likewise, although Kline is careful to dismiss those academics who 'conclude after only a cursory look at the advertising industry that marketing is a simple matter of manipulation of individual consciousness by wily advertisers' (p. 24), his analysis, despite its sophistication, does share similar pitfalls. Namely, that in holding an *a priori* notion that the profit motive and big business lead to the decimation of cultural diversity, it is impossible to account for the innovation and complexity of children's television within a deregulated market system. For example, *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* and similar forms of animation, for all their machismo and mythic narrative, introduced a novel articulation of the limits of the body in a techno-scientific landscape: a kind of populist precursor to *Akira* (Katsuhiro Otomo, 1988). This said, my point is not to argue that the nexus of marketing and television industries has been accountable to public tastes and pleasures nor to excuse such industries. However, at a time when sociology and cultural studies are beginning to rethink a monolithic construction of childhood in favour of a pluralization of diverse childhoods, it would seem that these media industries, with their concern for new and ever more profitable niche markets and with their sophisticated research techniques, have their finger more firmly placed on young people's pulses than Kline's book might suggest.

Kline has 'high ideals'. He wants to see television forms that produce 'positive images of personality', 'stories which help [young people] adjust to life's tribulations' and stories which 'promote play activities that are most help to their maturation' (p. 350). In short, a more pedagogic approach which 'would promote the full development of children' and hence produce 'a more civilised society' (p. viii). But

it is unclear whether this is asking too much of, or even whether this is actually wanted by, children. And this, I think, is a key point. It is not simply that the toy manufacturers, marketing companies and television corporations produce *entertainment* and that those not tainted by the world of commerce maintain the values of *education* and *morality*, but that those media industries have been incredibly successful in producing and selling forms of pleasure which are both *popular* and *pedagogical*.

Buckingham, in *Moving Images*, is, in part, similarly concerned with questions about pedagogy. But for Buckingham there is no hint of nostalgia and no yearning for the full development of the child. Toward the end of the introductory chapter, he argues for a turn to 'a more constructive *educational* approach, that empowers children and parents to make informed decisions on their own behalf' (p. 16). And although it is questionable whether media education can *empower* children and parents, Buckingham makes a useful intervention in the hopelessly flawed debates about media censorship. Central to his argument is a notion that children are tactical, televisually literate viewers and that both 'formal' and 'informal' educational strategies can be deployed and supported by parents, teachers and government. Such a strategy, which is not repressive, seems to be potentially more productive in an age when media images and information seem to be open to less centralized control.

Underlying Buckingham's arguments about children's television viewing and media education, which he has been making in different forms since the late 1980s, is an attempt to take young people's interpretative capacities seriously: that is *to listen to children's talk*. This is clearly signalled through Buckingham's focus upon the notion of children's *responses* rather than on the more laden notion of *effects*.<sup>3</sup> Buckingham argues that parents make the distinction between *our own children's* television viewing and the viewing habits of *other children*. And he quite rightly observes that what matters most to parents is not that their own children will turn into mad axe-murderers having watched *Nightmare on Elm Street*, but that they will be upset, scared stiff and possibly have nightmares. Children's fears about ghosts, ghouls and closeup shots of teeth visualized on children's television were common points of public discussion in the 1950s. But they were soon superseded in the 1960s with discussion about the psychology of children's mental stability and their imitative behaviours. Thus Buckingham returns us to an important focus of research that has been ignored in public debate for most of television's history, and he does so in such a way which makes the issue of children's emotions a matter for more sociologically inclined research. The philosophical questions are not overly pushed, but they raise a significant set of issues for further research.

<sup>3</sup> There is a danger of talking about research into media effects as if it constituted a single paradigm of knowledge and, although Buckingham briefly refers to differences between research into *behavioural* effects and *ideological* effects, most of the public debate about media effects has been dominated by a particular type of social psychological approach: namely, social learning theory.

Buckingham considers children's emotional responses to television in relation to a range of highly contested genres (horror, melodrama, news and 'faction') in a manner which takes children's modality judgements (the ability to make judgements about reality and fantasy) seriously, without falling into what is now one of the banalities of research in this area: that children's ability to discern the constructed nature of visual media (that is, to recognize that a representation is not real) shields them from its effects. Buckingham forcefully states that the problem is more complex and shows how young people employ a range of tactics for enjoying and coping with their own feelings of distress, delight, sadness and fear at what they watch. These tactics might include the now longstanding move of putting one's hands in front of one's eyes or talking to parents, watching with friends or re-viewing scenes of horror on video until they become tamed.

Such reactions have led Buckingham to conclude that *regulation* in its present incarnation is ineffective and needs to be rethought. He shows in his research that parental attempts to restrict their children's viewing is, with certain qualifications, increasingly ineffective. Children with older siblings, for example, enjoy the benefits of a more relaxed parental regime. Video tapes are hidden to be watched at a time when the parents are away or asleep. Babysitters are exploited as the harbingers of greater viewing freedoms. And parents are now more concerned about their teenage children's ability to make informed decisions and to self-regulate their viewing, than about prohibiting particular programmes. Similarly, he shows that forms of centralized control, such as the watershed and video classification, are used as a barometer of accepted opinion, but are not closely observed either by parents or children. It seems that parents are happy to apply their own more localized rules according to their own, and their children's, competencies and maturity.

However, it is difficult to agree with Buckingham that such findings show that 'the *site* of regulation has begun to shift in recent years', as a result of video and other new screen technologies, to both parents and children (p. 253). Firstly, although the concern to make parents responsible and children self-regulating has undoubtedly intensified in recent years, broadcasters, educationalists, psychologists, government and other experts, since the 1950s, have always been concerned with governing domestic viewing practices. Secondly, it is far from clear that government has given up hope of regulating media industries in the face of new technologies. In the UK, the Conservative Government has made an example of the satellite pornography channel Red Hot Dutch (based in Holland) by making it illegal for the channel to market itself in this country. Likewise, recent legislative moves in the USA have focused on making internet service providers, and not simply consumers, legally culpable for the media content which is distributed through them. Similar moves have been initiated in relation to the UK internet industry, alongside suggested changes to

the existing obscenity legislation. A new body has been set up, within the industry, to monitor and filter pornography on the internet. This is not to say, of course, that increased globalization and new technologies do not make attempts by national governments to regulate the production and distribution of media products more difficult.

Nevertheless Buckingham's close analysis of young people's talk about their emotional responses to television, and of the social relations within which such talk is embedded, shows that he has a keen eye for policy. His opening and closing chapters provide an astute intervention in the area of television violence and media effects: an area that is constantly covered in the tabloid press and hotly contested at a popular level. In these wider, more common-sense debates, media studies academics are often ridiculed and pushed aside in favour of the expertise of the psychologist, the psychiatrist and the paediatrician. One only has to remember the poor reaction to media studies academics during the public debate fuelled by a leading developmental psychologist's Parliamentary discussion paper in the aftermath of the Bulger trial.<sup>4</sup> The issue of the public authority of media studies expertise within the area of young people and the media has not gone away. It looks set to become a major concern with new calls for greater State regulation of television, video and internet services following the publication of 'Violence, Pornography and the Media', a report submitted to Parliament by the Parliamentary All Party Family and Child Protection Group. What Buckingham delivers in his research is a closely argued and empirically thorough analysis which not only shifts the problem of children and television towards concerns about the social relations of young people's emotional responses, but does so in a manner accessible and credible to those outside media studies, and pertinent to the oncoming policy calculations necessary for a changed, post-digital and post-deregulation, media landscape.

4 Elizabeth Newson, *Video Violence and the Protection of Children*, unpublished paper presented to Parliament, March 1994.

## **review:**

**Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: the Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1995, 271pp.**

**Robert A. Rosenstone (ed.), *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, 245pp.**

## **GUY WESTWELL**

Both *Visions of the Past* and *Revisioning History* focus on film as a serious vehicle for describing, understanding and learning from the past. Rosenstone supplies his own concise mission statement:

*The premise* – the visual media are a legitimate way of doing history – of representing, interpreting, thinking about, and making meaning from the traces of the past.

*The approach* – the historical film must be seen not in terms of how it compares to written history but as a way of recounting the past with its own rules of representation.

*The films* – traditional costume dramas and documentaries are less important as history than a new kind of film, made all over the world – one that seriously deals with the relationship of past and present. (*Revisioning*, p. 3)

For a concise and accessible book to negotiate debates within the fields of academic history, film studies and critical theory is no mean feat. Rosenstone, a historian by training, chooses not to shoulder the baggage of conventional approaches to visual history. He dismisses ‘the history of film as art and industry, and the analysis of film as a document (text) that provides a window onto the social and cultural

concerns of an era – [as being] well within the boundaries of traditional historical practice' (*Visions*, p. 3). Whilst critical of historians' approaches to visual history, Rosenstone is conveniently quiet about (European) film theory's attempts to think film historically. There is no mention of the debates around popular memory, the examination of history in ideological (via Althusser) terms, or to psychoanalytic descriptions of how the past is constructed in relation to modes of address, desire and anxiety. This refusal to get bogged down in film theory's internal wranglings over how to reconcile film to larger historical questions affords *Visions of the Past* an attractively unencumbered position from which to rethink the analysis of visual history.

The alternative on offer is a good 'dose of theory' (*Visions*, p. 10). The contextual parameters of this theory are drawn in broad strokes, the bottom line being that the past is accessible only through 'histories', and that orthodox academic histories can no longer command authority over visual histories on a level playing field where everything is 'textual'. The theory effectively clears the way for Rosenstone to offer a 'new' analytical framework built on a solid foundation of incisive questions:

How does film construct a historical world? What are the rules, codes, and strategies by which it brings the past to life? What does that historical construction mean to us? . . . What does film do to and for the past that the written word cannot? How does the historical world on the screen relate to the word on the page? (*Revisioning*, p. 4)

*Visions of the Past* is a convenient collation of Rosenstone's own work on the historical film. At the heart of this collection is the analysis of a broad range of visual histories – commercial, documentary, independent and experimental. These are presented chronologically (by publication) and chart Rosenstone's shifting relationship towards visual representations of the past. At first he appears sceptical of the possibility that film may play a positive role in the historical process. As historical consultant to the film *Reds* (Warren Beatty, 1981) and the documentary *The Good Fight* (Noel Buckner, Mary Dore, Sam Sills, 1984) Rosenstone plays the part of the historian (whose faith in conventional historiography is still intact) having difficulty coming to terms with the commercial, formal and financial constraints placed on the production of visual history. His later more detached and analytical examinations of *Walker* (Alex Cox, 1987) *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1992) and *Sans Soleil* (Chris Marker, 1982), are evidence of his rejection of this historiographical convention and an embrace of the features once found so objectionable in the commercial sphere such as condensation, alteration and omission.

This trajectory is worth describing in more detail. Rosenstone writes:

For those who care about history, here is the locus of the problem. In *Reds*, memory is equated with history. Memory is seen as faulty, and thus history as well. This approach allows the filmmaker to have it both ways. He can at once indulge himself by playing historian and yet ignore – whenever convenient – all known techniques of assessing evidence from the past, as well as the findings of previous research and scholarship. (*Revisioning*, p. 91)

By evoking memory (the role of the witnesses in the film) whilst performing historical representation (the realist and narrativist dynamic of the biopic) the possibility of a responsible historical account is compromised by the reliance upon condensation, alteration and omission. Rather than destabilizing the ‘historical truth’ of the film, the memory sections simply provide the artistic licence which Hollywood requires to perform its history – an identifiable romance, narrative economy and anaemic politics. This licence amounts to a narrative imperative which leaves the commercial historical film no mechanism for informing the audience that this is only one interpretation amongst many, that the narrative has been imposed on a life which was never lived as beginning, middle and end, and that the realities of political radicalism cannot be effaced if John Reed is to be understood in a historically complex and valuable way.

Rosenstone’s analysis shows a sophisticated grasp of the necessities involved in the tailoring of history to an acceptable commercial cut. Alongside his criticism of the formal properties of the text he adopts the role of the professional historian who has specialized in the life and times of John Reed and provides us with an opinion of which transgressions are significant. This is Rosenstone at his most persuasive – handling the formal strategies of historical representation alongside a more conventional and extensive historical knowledge. Perhaps the most useful contribution of *Visions of the Past* to the field of film history is demonstrating an effective non-reductionist way of placing these strategies side by side.

Commercial film (and in particular the classical Hollywood model) would appear to form the cornerstone of Rosenstone’s approach to the historical film, providing the conventional and inaccurate representational system against which other more progressive possibilities can be tested. I feel he is perhaps too quick to jettison this work for the radical alternatives offered by independent and experimental film. A more comprehensive survey of conventional historical representation might have provided a firmer base from which to venture out in search of more progressive models for visualizing the past.

From *Reds* and *The Good Fight* to *JFK* and *Walker*, Rosenstone’s trajectory is marked by an increasing specialization in challenging and

unconventional visual histories. Rosenstone ends his examination of the historical film with an analysis of *Sans Soleil*. Initially an oral commentary delivered at one of the film's screenings, this is a loosely formulated series of observations on the myriad philosophical and historical issues raised by the film. Rosenstone celebrates how the film experiments with the fragile task of representing history, collapsing the personal and the political, and examining the temporal confusion of past, present and future. The challenge Marker's history extends to conventional historiography is echoed in the challenge Rosenstone's essay offers to academic modes of address. Rosenstone embraces the postmodern, openly showing his distrust of formal systems of any sort – academic, historical or filmic. In Rosenstone's own words:

That *Sans Soleil* is obsessed and suffused with memory, anyone who sees it has to agree. But is it a work of history? That may be harder to accept. Certainly not history as we know it in written forms – not even history as it usually appears on the screen. But I see it as a possible form of history, one that is densely visual and verbal, that privileges neither the word nor the image but somehow sets them against each other to achieve new sorts of understanding. . . . Certainly it is a kind of history that has escaped the ghost of positivism that lingers in the machine of the social sciences – escaped any idea that history consists of data arranged in neat building blocks, each one part of a grand edifice of knowledge. (*Visions*, p. 165, emphasis mine)

It is this 'setting against each other' that underpins the whole book. Textual and visual representations of the past, commercial, independent and experimental film, conventional historiography and postmodern theory are thrown together in the hope that all will be subject to critical investigation in an abrasive but constructive manner.

Whilst memory allows responsibility for historical representation to be shunned, as in the case of *Reds*, it can at the same time be used to force open the strict rational and empirical structures of conventional historiography to allow a more experimental and progressive history to find breathing space, as in the case of *Sans Soleil*. What is offered is a prescription for a confrontational (and perhaps progressive towards some unspecified end-goal) representation of the past. This prescription is dependent on the adequacy of the preceding description of the constant, consolidated and classical modes it seeks to confront. By examining visual history across genres and within different formal, industrial and institutional systems, Rosenstone establishes a convincing comparative address which effectively links description and prescription together.

*Revisioning History* consists of fourteen papers commissioned by Rosenstone to build on the foundation laid down in *Visions of the*

*Past*. The collection confines itself to the discussion of independent, avant-garde and experimental film. This focus on marginalized cinema and documentary perhaps suffers from the loss of a connection to its comparative ‘other’. The specialization does allow a more specific description of the different paradigms raised by the ‘serious’ or confrontational historical film. (*Revisioning*, pp. 8–13)

The first paradigm is that of ‘contesting history’: the abstractions usually associated with history – political, social or economic – are challenged by film’s recourse to the personal and private, and its ability to recount detail and represent surface. Geoff Eley’s account of *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (Terence Davies, 1988) is particularly effective in this respect. The analysis contextualizes the film historically, bringing together the relevant social, political and economic histories of the period in which the film is set as well as those in which it was produced. These frameworks are confronted by the extremely personal, focused and detailed evidence offered by the film. *Distant Voices* is anti-nostalgic, realist and traumatic; *Still Lives* addresses nostalgia, fantasy and the healing process. The film makes an important connection between the ‘here and now’ and ‘back then’, stressing the personal negotiation of the past. Eley’s contextual account of the more abstracted histories which surround this personal journey insert the film into the historical process in an illuminating way. Film emotionalizes history and, handled in a serious and intelligent way, this intensity of feeling can ‘contest’ conventional historiography.

The second paradigm is that of ‘visioning history’: the process of establishing historical fact is challenged through a destabilization of film form and the corresponding critical self-awareness in the audience. Clayton Koppes account of *Radio Bikini* (Robert Stone, 1987) focuses on how the documentary places official news footage of nuclear tests at Bikini atoll in July 1964 into a destabilizing context. By slightly altering the parameters of the footage (‘showing officers rehearsing their scripted lines’ [p. 134]) we are presented with original archived material whilst at the same time being forced to engage with it in a sceptical manner. That ‘The media, focused on the immediate and dramatic, [and] showed little interest in radiation’s more difficult (and officially downplayed) tragedy’ (p. 134) is the history which *Radio Bikini* reveals from the official ‘facts’. The footage of servicemen exposed to radiation near the test sight is supplemented by conventional documentary accounts of their ensuing illness, disease, disfigurement and death. The story of these men charts the long-term effects caused by the initial exposure to radiation, this story instils the original archival footage with a disturbing and challenging historical significance after the fact. Film’s own potential for manipulating historical sense is explored using film itself, indicating some of the potential that might be realized in a critical and self-reflexive film history.

The third paradigm is that of ‘revisioning history’: the staples of the commercial historical film – realism and narrative – are associated with historiographic convention, and these conventions are challenged by experiment with the form and content of the historical film. Both Rosenstone’s and Higashi’s examinations of *Walker* describe how the film puts in place the conventional apparatus of the historical film – focus on the individual, verisimilitude and a coherent narrative. These features are then deconstructed through the underplayed but substantial use of omission, condensation, alteration, invention and anachronism.

As Rosenstone writes:

As a work of history, it successfully does the following three things: (1) performs a variety of traditional historical tasks; (2) goes beyond these tasks to create new ways of visualising our relationship to the past, and (3) provides a ‘truth’ that can stand beside all the written versions of William Walker’s story that have appeared over the last 135 years. (p. 134)

That *Walker* becomes so integral to the prescription of a progressive historiography reflects the interdependency of the conventional and the experimental.

As Rosenstone’s third point indicates, there is consensus across all the papers that the analysis of the historical film can only be effectively undertaken if other forms of history from textual to visual to oral are brought into play. Only through comparative exchange can an individual film be evaluated and judged. Whilst the rigour of this approach is impressive (Rosenstone consults everything ever published on *Walker*) it would make the examination of a large corpus, or genre, of historical films difficult under current academic constraints.

Rosenstone’s work has been restricted to only a handful of films over a ten year period. Whilst the contextualizing of the historical film is essential it is also important to examine how subject positions are established in relation to visual history. The positions offered by the historical film rely on a consistent combination of affect, recognition and verisimilitude. An adequate description of these generic properties, across a wide variety of commercial, independent and experimental film, is perhaps more important than the historical injustices done in any one film.

In its movement from classical historiography to experimental or postmodernist history, Rosenstone’s work reflects a more general crisis in the adequacy of history to describe the past. This is combined with a sense that the visual is becoming more and more important (Rosenstone describes a post-literate society where people *can* read but don’t [*Revisioning*, p. 78]). Instead of critical pessimism, Rosenstone offers a way of searching out new alternatives for the construction of historical meaning. He searches globally, and without

much methodological clarity, elevating a diverse range of independent documentary and art films to the status of blueprint for an enhanced historiography which can more adequately describe our fractured sense of the past.

The framework offered by Rosenstone is stabilized through the theoretically convenient separation of written and visual history. CD-ROM and internet technologies appear to accelerate the convergence of these media and their attendant theoretical dilemmas. By collaging film, primary sources, oral description, original footage and dissertative work, new technologies have the potential to confuse much of the theoretically distinct boundaries upon which Rosenstone's work is based. With the increased capacity to integrate distinct media (and their differences and potential as identified by Rosenstone) it might perhaps be possible to imagine a historiography in which formal properties no longer hold text and image apart.<sup>1</sup> It will be interesting to re-evaluate the ideas formulated in both *Visions of the Past* and *Revisioning History* across these new media landscapes.

<sup>1</sup> See CBS News and *The New York Times*, *The War in Vietnam: A Multimedia Chronicle* (New York: Macmillan Digital, 1998); Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus* (New York: Voyager Co., 1994).